

鐵血

GUARDIAN

镇魂 Guardian

Preface

General Editor fangirlishness
QC solo

This translation is based on a translation of chapters 1-82 made by rainbowse7en. Chapters 83-106 were translated by fandoestrans, ineffablebs, and solo.

The poem in chapter 65 has been translated by dtriad and is used with permission.

Thank you to jaybottlecat, cyberbrain, elenothar, neery, and several volunteers from the Guardian discord, as well as all the readers who left helpful comments and fixes.

Proofing of content and editing for style by solo and fangirlishness.

Language consultation and cultural advice by deeperfriedkoi and fandoestrans.

Extras #1, #2, #3, #5 have been translated by foxghost.
The Shen San extra (#4) is not part of this edition.

The extras have not been edited, but a glossary was added to explain differences in translation to the main novel.

Thank you to everyone who has accompanied us on this journey over the last three years. Consider buying the novel at [jjwxc](http://jjwxc.com) to support its author, priest.

Edition 1.0 March 2022

No. 4 Bright Avenue

Chapter 1

It's July 15 of the lunar calendar¹, and the sky is still dark.

Night owls big and small have returned to their nests. Even on the spacious avenues of Dragon City, everything seems awfully quiet, with only the occasional bug buzzing from the bushes, elusive and bewildering, the atmosphere heightened with anticipation.

It's half past two in the morning, and morning dew falls, turning the air humid.

Humid and sticky.

Perhaps it's because of the wind, but a shadow seems to be lurking in every corner, and as one walks along the avenue, there always seems to be something glaring from behind.

It's at this time that Guo Changcheng walks into No. 4 Bright Avenue, carrying a recruitment letter.

Guo Changcheng's parents died when he was young. With his mediocre looks, and an introverted and cowardly disposition, suffice to say, he's not very competent. Fortunately, his relatives² have been quite nice to him and looked after him until he graduated from university.

Unfortunately, Guo Changcheng fails to live up to any sort of expectation imaginable. He struggled to graduate from a low-tier university, and with rather mediocre grades, too. Despite being an adult now, he's uptight³ and afraid in front of strangers.

As one would expect, Guo Changcheng couldn't find a job. After he graduated, he wasted almost a year at home, slacking.

Afterwards, when his uncle was transferred to the Ministry of Public Security, he pulled some strings to get his hopeless nephew a job.

And so Guo Changcheng thought that he would spend his future working nine to five in a uniform, drinking tea and shuffling papers, and playing dominoes in between. That is, until he received this bizarre 'Recruitment Notice'.

When it arrived, Guo Changcheng thought that there must have been some sort of mistake. The notice was written in expertly penned red letters:

*"Comrade Guo,
Congratulations on being recruited by our department. You will enjoy the benefits and status of a national civil servant, with an above average salary. At the same time, you will be responsible for serving the people. We hope that, in the days to come in your new station, you will devote yourself to your job, staunchly forge ahead, obey your leader, love your comrades, serve society by maintaining the peace, and contribute to the country's prosperity.
Please bring this notice and your ID, and report to our office at 2:30 am on August 31 (July 15 of the lunar calendar). Our address: Human Resources Department, 1/F, No. 4 Bright Avenue.
I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you as our new comrade on behalf of our staff.
Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China*

*Special Investigations Unit
DD/MM/YYYY"*

Normally, when one sees such a strange reporting time, one would expect it to be a typo, and would call for confirmation. But Guo Changcheng, being the anti-social freak he is, has a rather peculiar case of telephone phobia. The thought of having to make a phone call leaves him sleepless all night.

So he never made the call.

Instead, Guo Changcheng came up with a perfect plan: he would stay up all night and go to No. 4 Bright Avenue at half past two in the morning. If there was no one there, he would take a nap at a McDonald's nearby and come back at half past two in the afternoon. He figured that either one of these two times must be right.

At this hour, the metro is out of service, leaving Guo Changcheng no choice but to drive. Struggling even with the help of GPS, he finally manages to find the right place.

No. 4 Bright Avenue isn't actually very bright, but rather hidden in a secluded courtyard. Guo Changcheng stops and hesitates at the entrance for a while, then turns on the flashlight on his phone, and finds a small sign with the building number on it underneath the lush Japanese ivy.

Below the sign is a small engraving on the rock, which reads 'Special Investigations Unit'; there's even the emblem of the MPS beneath it.

The courtyard is lush with vegetation. Past the car park area is a line of Japanese pagoda trees, forming a small grove. Among the trees is a narrow path, which leads to a small reception hut and an old office building.

Lights are on in the hut, and a uniformed figure can be seen inside, wearing a service cap and reading a newspaper, flipping the pages from time to time.

Sweating nervously, Guo Changcheng takes a deep breath and, without much thought about why the reception office is open at this time of night, he begins to mutter to himself.

"I am reporting as a new recruit, this is my notice letter... I am reporting as a new recruit, this is my notice letter... I am reporting as a new recruit, this is my notice letter..." Guo Changcheng stands in

the same spot, reciting the lines dozens of times like a schoolkid memorising for an exam, rolling the words on his tongue like an incantation. Finally, he gathers his courage⁴ and shakily knocks on the window of the reception, then feebly mutters as if making a dying confession, "I am reporting as a new notice... this is my letter recruit..."

"What?" asks the bewildered middle-aged man at the reception.

He's screwed! How could he mess up a simple line like that? Guo Changcheng is almost in tears, his face starting to look like purple yam.

Fortunately, the man sees the letter and realises what he's here for. "Oh! You're the newbie! What should I call you? Oh, I see it, Xiao Guo⁵, huh? We haven't had a newcomer in quite some years. This place isn't easy to find, right?"

Guo Changcheng is relieved. He likes meeting friendly and eager people: the more talkative the other person is, the less he needs to say. All he has to do is nod or shake his head.

"So this is your first day, huh? Let me tell you, you're so lucky! It just so happens that our Chief is here tonight! Come on, I'll introduce you to everyone."

Guo Changcheng tenses up, his hair standing on end. He's not feeling lucky whatsoever. Rather, he feels like his brain is leaking mouldy air.

Guo Changcheng is particularly afraid of people of high status and power. When he was little, he would start curling up whenever he saw a teacher, and he would turn around and run for his life if he ever saw the principal. Albeit a law-abiding citizen, when he sees a policeman, he's like a rat faced with a cat.

Meeting the Chief? He'd rather meet ghosts.

At this moment, the doors of the small office building are pushed open, and a young man comes striding out.

The man has a cigarette in his mouth, hands buried in his pockets. He is slender and tall, with a straight posture, thick eyebrows, deep-set eyes, and a high nose. Extremely handsome, but wearing an extremely sombre expression.

Frowning and quick-paced⁶, his body seems to be saying, 'Don't stand in my way, make room for the boss!' Guo Changcheng comes face to face with the man and is immediately stunned by his eyes. Beautiful yet sharp, those eyes make shivers run down his back. This handsome man seems ill-tempered.

Surprisingly, when the man sees him standing by the doorway, he makes an abrupt stop. In a split second, his face changes from thunder and lightning to clear skies, and he puts on the most genuine and cordial smile possible.

Two soft dimples appear on his cheeks, his mouth curls up into a somewhat crooked smile because of his cigarette, and his eyes curve more deeply with a hint of mischief in them—just the right amount of mischievous, but amiable still.

"Well, speak of the devil⁷! Hey kid, meet our Chief." The middle-aged man gives Guo Changcheng a push from behind, and he almost stumbles and falls. His mind goes blank as he hears a voice behind him say, "Chief Zhao, we have a newcomer today."

"Hi, my warmest welcome." Chief Zhao extends his hand in greeting.

Half-paralysed, Guo Changcheng tries to wipe off the sweat on his hands, and embarrassingly extends the wrong hand for a handshake. He quickly withdraws it as if he got an electric shock; the

nerve-wracking experience leaves his short-sleeved shirt soaked in sweat, slowly forming a world map on his back.

Chief Zhao lets out a very restrained laugh, and raises his hand to give Guo Changcheng a pat on the shoulder. "No need to be nervous, our colleagues are all very nice and friendly. Since it's your first day, I really should walk you around, but you see, today happens to be a special day, and we're extremely busy, please don't feel left out. I'll hold a welcome party for you at a later time. Oh would you look at the time... how about this: let Lao Wu⁸ take you inside to meet Wang Zheng, our HR manager, and she'll help you with employment procedures. Then you can go back to rest and come back tomorrow morning. Does that sound good?"

Guo Changcheng nods nervously.

No matter how desperately hurried Chief Zhao seemed a moment ago, as he's standing still and talking to Guo Changcheng, his manner is remarkably calm and stately, his speech neither panicked nor busy, his tone neither anxious nor slow, his attitude neither too warm nor too cold.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm in a hurry. If there's anything you need, you can tell me when I get back. Don't be shy, we're a family now, sorry for troubling you today!" Chief Zhao gives Guo Changcheng a gentle, apologetic smile, then nods at Lao Wu, and rushes off.

Lao Wu is clearly a big fan of Chief Zhao. Just listening to a conversation that wasn't even about him has made him happy as a clam. As he leads Guo Changcheng into the office building, he begins singing Chief Zhao's praises: "Our Chief is young, capable, well-tempered, and always kind and genuine towards everyone, never putting on airs..."

Guo Changcheng has yet to recover from the horrors of meeting the big Chief, and barely hears Lao Wu.

And because he's always afraid of making direct eye contact, he also hasn't noticed that Lao Wu's face is deathly pale, his lips blood-red, his mouth splitting almost to his earlobes—and when he opens and closes it, it appears he has no tongue.

The office is full of busy people; it really seems to be a hectic time.

It's only then that Guo Changcheng finally realises there's something strange about this office: it's not unusual for people to work overtime, but is it really necessary for the entire staff—including the receptionist—to be working until this late hour?

"No worries," Lao Wu explains, "you'll mostly be working day shift. As long as there are no major cases, we rarely have to work overtime. But since it's July, the few days around the 15th are the most hectic time of the year for us. Don't be concerned though, overtime pays three times the usual salary, and you'll even get a bonus at the end of the month."

Guo Changcheng is even more perplexed. What does he mean with "the few days around the 15th are the most hectic time of the year for us"? Do criminals hold regular meetings and pick special times of the year to commit crimes? And they even follow the lunar calendar?

However, Guo Changcheng is afraid to appear stupid, so keeps his questions to himself and simply nods.

Lao Wu continues, "As for me, I usually work the night shift. A different colleague staffs the reception during the day." He sighs. "I guess we won't get to see each other much in the future. Have you just graduated? From which university? What did you study?"

Guo Changcheng shamefully admits his rather disappointing and lacklustre academic achievements, adding in a near-whisper, "I'm not very good with learning..."

"Well, you're still a university graduate nonetheless! I like educated young people, since I wasn't capable myself. When I was young, my family was poor, so I never got the chance to get a proper education. When I was around seven or eight, I studied at a private school⁹ for just a short while. But after all these years, I've almost forgotten all the stuff that I learnt, I can only barely read the newspaper now!"

What stuff? Private school?

Guo Changcheng is again confused but still afraid to appear stupid, so he decides to keep his questions to himself again.

"Oh, we're here!" Lao Wu exclaims cheerfully.

Guo Changcheng lifts his head and sees a door with a giant sign on it that reads 'Human Resources' in red letters on a white board, and a very eerie red as well. Guo Changcheng ponders why this red seems so strange and suspicious, and to his shock, he realises that... the words look as if they were written with dried... blood!

Lao Wu knocks on the door, "Is Xiao Wang here? We have a newcomer today, can I trouble you to complete his employment procedures?"

After a brief silence, a very soft female voice says, "I'm coming."

The voice seems to come from very far away, and yet seems to float just beside his ears. At once, a chill surges down Guo Changcheng's spine.

Blissfully ignorant of his feelings, Lao Wu says, "Sorry for troubling you at this time of night, Xiao Guo, but you see, Xiao Wang is just like me, we can only do night shifts, so employment procedures can only be carried out around this time."

Hold on... what does he mean by... 'can only do night shifts'?

Guo Changcheng feels increasingly uncomfortable, and more icy shivers run down his back. Trembling with fear, he glances at a worker passing by, and instantly feels chilled to the bone.

Guo Changcheng can clearly see the uniformed worker gliding mid-air along the corridor.

He... he he he he he he he doesn't have feet!!!

The door to the office creaks open just then, and a young girl in a white dress appears, asking in a reedy voice that makes his skin break out in goosebumps, "Have you brought the recruitment letter and your ID card?"

A chilling breeze comes rushing out of the room, and Guo Changcheng feels as if his heart were about to stop beating and burst. He's afraid if he doesn't speak now he might not be able to speak again for the rest of his life.

He holds his breath and slowly lifts his head, his gaze sweeping across the spotless white dress, stopping at the girl's bare neck.

A second later, he makes a rasping noise as if he were being choked. His jaw is hanging open but he can't even produce a scream. His eyes look as though they're about to pop out, and his limbs are petrified as he slowly stumbles backwards, as if his body were no longer his.

He sees... he sees a red line marked across the girl's neck! It's not a necklace, but a line that deeply sinks into her skin... a tightly sewn line stitching her head to her neck!

An icy hand rests on Guo Changcheng's shoulder, and Lao Wu says, "Hey, Xiao Guo, you doing okay?"

Guo Changcheng turns and sees Lao Wu's pale-as-paper face and gaping maw¹⁰.

'Meeting the Chief? He'd rather meet ghosts.' Perhaps this is karma paying him back for that thought.

Two seconds later, Guo Changcheng passes out without a sound.

He's so intent on not looking stupid that he doesn't even roll up his eyes before his body goes rigid and falls to the floor.

His uncle truly found him a remarkable job.

Sundial of Reincarnation

Chapter 2

Street lights flicker like fireflies in the air, barely able to penetrate the heavy darkness. A young girl hurries along the uneven pavement, coming to a sudden halt when she trips and falls heavily to her knees.

In the suffocating heat of the summer night, Li Qian takes deep, unsteady breaths, her fingers tightly clutching her clothes.

All she can hear is her own rapid heartbeat, and the shuffling footsteps from behind.

It's a distinctive sound that can only be made by traditional soft-soled cloth shoes, and the wearer's gait is uneven, as if dragging a bad leg.

Li Qian abruptly looks behind herself, but there's nothing in sight besides the tiny insects hovering around the street lamps.

Her features are delicate, and she would normally be considered pretty, but one would hardly think that looking at her in her current state. Her lips are as pale as her face, and her sweat-soaked hair is dishevelled and clings uncomfortably to her skin.

Gradually, her expression changes into a bitter sneer laced with pure terror.

"Go away," she says through gritted teeth. "If I can get rid of you once, I can get rid of you again."

The footsteps stop.

Li Qian rolls up her sleeves, revealing pale arms awash with goosebumps despite the sultry summer heat.

She picks up a brick from the ground, as footsteps close in on her from all directions¹¹ like a swarm of bone-devouring maggots. But she still can't see what's causing the sounds.

Invisible threats are the most frightening ones.

Li Qian begins to scream, violently swinging at the air with the brick.

The brick seems to grow heavier and heavier, and the coarse surface grates the tender skin of her palm. Exhausted and dizzy, she bends over with her hands on her knees and pants heavily.

Li Qian's attention is unexpectedly drawn to the ground. Her pupils constrict and she begins to tremble violently. The brick falls from her hand and onto her toes, but she doesn't seem to feel the pain at all. As she stumbles backwards, her knees give way and she crumples to the ground in shock.

A shadow... there's a shadow!

The street lamp is in front of her. How can there be a shadow inside the circle of light cast by that street lamp?

It may look like black ink splattered across the ground, but it's unmistakably standing.

Who knows how long that shadowy figure has been 'watching' her as she sat in a crumpled heap on the ground.

Screeching laughter rings in her ears. *If you haven't done anything wrong, why are you so horrified by a shadow?*

~~~

It's not quite five o'clock in the early morning when the phone on the bedside table begins ringing.

Having worked through the night, Zhao Yunlan rolled right into bed when he got home, not even taking time to undress first. He seemed to have barely lain down before being cruelly woken again.

His face is expressionless as he opens his eyes, fatigue deepening the creases in his eyelids. The rancour in his eyes, however, is unmistakable as he stares at the ceiling above. Three seconds later, he pulls himself into a sitting position, tries to shake off the fog clouding his brain, and reaches for his mobile phone.

Zhao Yunlan's room is remarkably chaotic, worse than the messiest dog kennel—even dogs would protest if you called it a doghouse.

His clothes are scattered everywhere, all over the bed and on the floor—it's anyone's guess whether they're clean or supposed to go in the wash. The large twin bed is also covered with an array of other items: the laptop with a single sock dangling from a corner, sunglasses, and umbrella are a little unusual, but much more baffling are the origami top hat and a whole can of cinnabar powder<sup>12</sup>. And in the midst of the knick-knacks on the bed, a sliver of space barely large enough for one person to lie down has been dug out.

Zhao Yunlan looks extremely resentful, as if he'll burst out swearing any second. But when he picks up the phone, his tone is completely normal, just a little hoarse. It's as if he's used to this kind of situation. "What's up this time?"

"Someone died," Wang Zheng says, concise and to the point.

"When?"

"Last night or this morning, not long ago."

"Where?"



"University Street."

"Hmmm..." A grim expression crosses Zhao Yunlan's face. "Let Lao Chu take care of it."

"Chu Shuzhi went on a business trip to Xiangxi."

"What about Lin Jing?"

"Got called Downstairs."

"Fuck me... what about Zhu Hong? Oh never mind, there was a full moon yesterday, she must be on leave. Who else is at work?"

"I am, but it's almost sunrise so I have to go soon," says Wang Zheng. "There's also Da Qing and the new intern, Guo Changcheng."

Zhao Yunlan yawns, and says feebly, "Tell Da Qing to go with the intern, give the kid a chance to learn."

"Guo Changcheng can't go anywhere now," Wang Zheng explains. "When he came in last night, he passed out on the floor, and he's still unconscious."

For a moment, Zhao Yunlan is speechless. "What scared him so much that he fainted?" he asks.

"Lao Wu and I." Wang Zheng recounts the events and adds, "I told you to find a funeral supply shop to make Lao Wu a new body. Zhu Hong's hands are clumsier than her feet, and what she makes with sandbags and paper looks nowhere near like an actual person."

Zhao Yunlan sits on the edge of the bed silently. "It's against procedure if I show up, it might scare others..." he sighs eventually. "But I guess I have no choice. Fine, tell Da Qing to wait for me, I'll be there."

He hangs up, washes up in three minutes, and drives at speed towards University Street.

Rounding the corner, Zhao Yunlan is just slowing down when a shadow falls from the sky. With a loud bang, a furry ball catapults onto his windscreen with such force it almost crashes through it.

Zhao Yunlan stomps on the brake, rolls down the window, and yells, "This is called a motor vehicle! It's a transportation device, not your litter box! Try not to break it, will you!?"

On the bonnet sits a black tomcat, so fat and round that he seems to have no neck, with the furball edition of a perfectly round pancake face.<sup>13</sup> At first glance, he looks like an African cousin of Garfield. It's only by tucking in his hind legs and painstakingly sucking in his belly that he's able to stretch out his front legs and maintain a dignified sitting position. Turning his round face this way and that to make sure no one is within earshot, the cat flicks his whiskers and says, "Stop babbling and get out! Don't you notice that smell?"

The air is indeed filled with a strange odour, so foul it could be a bioweapon. Zhao Yunlan gets out of the car, covering his nose, and asks the cat, "It smells terrible! Did you just fart?"

The cat ignores his remarks, leaping off the windscreen and landing with a thunderous thud. Pointing his fat bottom at Zhao Yunlan, he struts ahead with an unmistakably feline air of superiority.

A few police cars are parked along the other side of the road and a police line has been set up at the entrance of a small alley.

Zhao Yunlan rummages in his pockets for some time before finally managing to locate a shabby-looking staff ID. An officer is guarding the police line; his back is to the crime scene and he's looking a little green in the face. He glances quickly at Zhao Yunlan's card and returns it, then rushes off to a wall and starts vomiting.

Zhao Yunlan scratches the unkempt mess doubling as his hair, bewildered. "Is my photo really that nauseating?"

The cat has walked way ahead of him and turns around impatiently, urging him on with a long and angry 'meow'.

"Right, right, the important stuff. Damn, this smell, it's deadly<sup>14</sup>."

Zhao Yunlan bends at the waist and ducks under the police line.

He is approached almost immediately. A man holding a tissue over his nose asks in a muffled voice, "Are you from the Special Investigations Unit?"

Everyone who works in the Ministry of Public Security knows of the mysterious department called the 'Special Investigations Unit'.

They're certainly not low-tier officers, but nobody knows what exactly it is that they do. Every time someone from the SIU is involved, it's always on order from the higher authorities, and nobody can object.

But if they don't come, nobody would know where to find them.

They belong to the MPS, but aren't always closely monitored; they're organised strictly and their procedures are wholly non-transparent. Without official approval, the media will never be able to locate the SIU, let alone interview or report anything about them.

Nobody knows how they do things, to be honest. When a case is handed to the SIU, it's like it enters a black box, and the only thing that comes out of it is a mysterious report.

Sometimes, SIU staff members are more bewildering than the most bewildering cases.

Their case reports are always detailed, logical, and impeccable, giving a full account of the entire process of solving the case and

catching the criminals involved.

But there is something suspicious: the criminals always die in the end.

While most of the cases they handle involve heinous crimes, so the suspects most probably deserve their demise, it's perhaps... a little too coincidental.

The officer in charge of the investigation is a senior policeman named Yang. He offers Zhao Yunlan a friendly handshake, and curiously sizes him up. "What should I call you?"

"Zhao Yunlan, Zhao Yunlan, you can just call me Xiao Zhao<sup>15</sup>."

Lao Yang is quite taken aback. Never would he have thought that this young man is the Chief of the SIU. He gives Zhao Yunlan an even closer look, and notices that he's tall, slender, and handsome, like a fashion model. Though it has to be said that his outfit isn't very pleasing: a scruffy shirt, only half-buttoned, half of it tucked in and the other half not; not to mention that bird's nest of a hairstyle.

But Chief Zhao is the Chief after all, no matter how messy he looks. Even if he ran around naked in the street, lower-ranked officers would probably have to praise him for trendsetting.

"Oh dear!" exclaims Lao Yang, "You're Chief Zhao! Excuse me for my ignorance, who would've thought our Chief is so young and accomplished!"

Zhao Yunlan is rather used to flattery, and naturally replies with some formal utterance.

Just then, someone is growing impatient, and a loud and clear "meow" can be heard. Lao Yang looks down and sees a black shadow bolting up<sup>16</sup> Zhao Yunlan's pants and shirt and onto his

shoulder. It's a black cat with green eyes. Normally, a black cat at a crime scene would be rather ominous, but this particular cat is just a bit too plump, so Yang's shock inadvertently transforms into worry about its cholesterol levels.

Lao Yang stares at it, and it stares right back. "This... this...?"

Embarrassed, Zhao Yunlan adjusts his pants, which the cat almost pulled off, and laughs. "This is our cat manager. He's really hard-working, so he doesn't like it when we chit chat during work."

Lao Yang is left speechless.

The cat arrogantly stretches its neck, albeit with difficulty due to its sheer size, and impatiently wriggles its tail.

Zhao Yunlan gets the message and reaches for the little badge around the cat's neck. With some effort, he digs it out of the long fur and shows it to Lao Yang. "This is a special permit of the SIU, equivalent to our staff badges. Don't worry, he's an experienced cat, he knows what he's doing."

Lao Yang begins to find this whole ordeal rather nonsensical.

He walks into the crime scene and a moment later, Chief Zhao follows him, carrying the cat.

The farther they go, the nastier the smell.

A female corpse lies in the narrow alley, wearing a t-shirt with 'Dragon City University Orientation Camp' printed on it. Her eyes and mouth are open, her body lies supine in the shape of a star, and her stomach has been cut open and emptied.

Lao Yang covers his nose with the tissue again, visibly disturbed<sup>17</sup>.

The fat cat on Zhao Yunlan's shoulder lets out a long "meow", leaps to the ground and circles the corpse twice. It then stops beside the corpse, sits down, and stares at Zhao Yunlan like a well-trained detection dog.

Zhao Yunlan walks towards the corpse. From his scruffy pocket he takes out a scruffy pair of gloves and puts them on. He examines the spot the cat is sitting on, and carefully lifts up one of the corpse's arms.

Lao Yang leans forward for a closer look, and sees a bloody hand mark on the floor.

That definitely can't be a human hand: the palm is only the size of a child's hand, but the fingers are at least twenty centimetres long. Lao Yang has been a policeman for practically his entire life, and he has never seen anything as bizarre.

While Yang is still mesmerised and stupefied, Zhao Yunlan remarks soberly, "From now on, the SIU will be in charge of this case. The handover procedures will be complete in two work days."

Lao Yang never gets a chance to reply, as Zhao Yunlan points towards a dilapidated door and asks, "What's in there?"

# Chapter 3

It turns out the small back door leads into Dragon City University.

Dragon City University is a famous institution with a long history.

It's almost the start of the academic year, so it would be reasonable to expect many people to be on campus. But there aren't, since the main campus has long been moved to the suburbs, leaving only a small administrative part. Now the remaining old campus is rarely used by students, though it's sometimes visited by tourists.

Zhao Yunlan is carrying the black cat, waiting at the entrance of a residential hall. They've been waiting for a while until Guo Changcheng finally arrives.

Only then does Zhao Yunlan realise that the intern is rather shabby-looking: hunched over, always looking down embarrassedly, his fringe almost covering both eyes, and listlessly dressed all in black as if going to a funeral. Looking at him from afar, he resembles a mushroom swaying in the wind.

As Guo Changcheng approaches, Zhao Yunlan asks the cat in his arms, "What do you think Wang Zheng said to him? He looks devastated<sup>18</sup>."

The black cat yawns in disinterest. "You're worrying too much, Mama Zhao."

Guo Changcheng sheepishly stumbles up to Zhao Yunlan and pleads in a squeaking voice, "Let me go with you to the crime scene..."

Zhao Yunlan teases him, "Who told you to come along? You could have called, our phone calls are reimbursed. And why can't you speak up a little?"

Guo Changcheng trembles and stutters, "Wang... Wang... Wang..." like a moaning puppy.

"Meow," says Da Qing the cat.

Zhao Yunlan is a bit disappointed. During their brief encounter the night before, he never noticed that this newcomer is the type who can't even speak properly. So he forces some pretence of friendliness into his voice: "You know roughly what happened, right? This is where the victim lived, let's go inside and take a look."

He heads inside, but realises that no-one is following him. He turns back and finds Guo Changcheng in an awkward staring contest with the mean-looking dormitory guard.

Zhao Yunlan tries not to get mad and calls Guo Changcheng as if calling a dog. "Come on, let's go! She knows who we are, there's no need to report in. Just come on in."

It would've been better if he'd said nothing at all. Hearing the word "report", Guo Changcheng reflexively snaps to attention in the doorway. "Re... re... reporting for duty!"

He realises his error immediately and freezes in the dormitory doorway, red-faced<sup>19</sup>.

Zhao Yunlan's first impression of Guo Changcheng can be summarised in three words: What an idiot.

Room 202 is a standard student apartment for two.

The black cat bounces off of Zhao Yunlan and begins scavenging thoroughly under the bed, under the closet, and on the window sill.



Suddenly, it smells something by the window and sneezes heavily.

After the big scare the other night, Guo Changcheng examines Chief Zhao closely, and to his relief, he realises that the handsome boss has a shadow in the daylight, and his exhausted and messy look after working overtime confirms that he is indeed human. Thus reassured, Guo Changcheng eagerly follows the Chief.

Zhao Yunlan takes out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, puts one in his mouth and lights it up swiftly. He leans forward and gives the cat a pat on the butt, so that it knows to step aside. Finally, he blows a cloud of smoke on the window sill.

It's not a choking kind of smoke at all. Infused with the scent of mint and fresh greenery, and mingling with the faint smell of his cologne, it makes whoever sees him feel rather carefree and relaxed, impressed by his confident air despite his unusually sloppy appearance.

"Look," Zhao Yunlan says.

Guo Changcheng looks towards the window sill and to his amazement, a handprint has emerged where there was nothing a moment ago.

Zhao Yunlan calmly gives the window sill a sniff. "It's not particularly stinky, only a cat like you could pick this up."

The black cat replies, "It's not it?"

Guo Changcheng is frozen in terror. Stunned, he stares at the talking cat, trembling helplessly.

Zhao Yunlan thoughtfully shakes his head amidst clouds of smoke. "I'm afraid not, deadly things don't smell like that."

He opens the window, turns around, and sees the stupefied Guo Changcheng, visibly horrified. It's clear that his entire worldview has been toppled, his nerves tied in butterfly knots. Unable to resist tormenting him a bit, Zhao Yunlan tells him, "Hey kid, you go up there, see what's outside the window."

Guo Changcheng only replies with an "Ah."

"Come on, young man, wise up and get up there!"

Guo Changcheng gulps nervously, and helplessly stares at the window: too high off the ground for him. But it takes just as much courage to turn back and tell the Chief that he can't do it.

Finding himself in a dilemma, the poor kid reluctantly slinks up onto the window sill like a snail, clutching the window frame as tightly as he can.

All he dares move is his head, and he looks around with great difficulty, cautiously peering out the window.

Suddenly, he sees a reflection on the window pane, and the hair on his entire body stands upright in fear. To his astonishment, the reflection on the window isn't just his own figure... There's another shadow!

Inexplicably, a human skeleton can be seen lying right beside him, its arm extending through his ankle and onto the window sill where the hand mark is, looking into the apartment...

Guo Changcheng looks at the window sill, but there isn't a single thing! He cannot believe his eyes, his chest freezes in pain, and it's getting hard to breathe.

Then, the skeleton turns its head towards him and looks at him through the reflection. There seems to be a small person in the skull's hollow eye sockets.

The person is covered in a black cloak, mysteriously shrouded in a cloud of black mist, and holds some strange object...

Guo Changcheng hasn't yet figured out what that strange object is, when he's interrupted by a voice from below. "Hey, student, what are you doing up there?" Startled by the sudden sound, Guo Changcheng slips on some lichen on the window sill and tragically falls victim to gravity.

With rapid reflexes, Zhao Yunlan rushes forward to grab him, but is a split second too late and only manages to grab his hair. Guo Changcheng wriggles in pain, Zhao Yunlan's hand slips, and down he falls.

The black cat sits calmly on the window sill and sluggishly wags his tail. "Meow..."

"Shit." Zhao Yunlan rushes out of the room and dashes downstairs, swearing. "This knucklehead."

Fortunately, a man standing below gives Guo Changcheng a hand to get up.

The man is lean and tall, very formally dressed in a white, long-sleeved shirt and pressed pants even in the heat of summer. The rimless glasses on his straight nose, as well as the lesson plans in his hand, give him a cultured and pristine air.

"Are you all right? Do you know how dangerous that was?"

Guo Changcheng doesn't reply, and instead looks back up at the window sill to confirm that there's indeed no skeleton.

It seems that the skeleton hanging outside the window and the black robed figure in its eyes were all a figment of his imagination.

Guo Changcheng sits on the ground, dumbfounded.

"Your legs are shaking, huh? Be more careful next time." The spectacled man bends forward a little and says patiently, "The university forbids climbing. If you're caught, your grades will be affected."

Guo Changcheng's head droops lifelessly; he thinks maybe he's completely useless after all. If there's no-one for him to sponge off, there's probably no hope for him: first day at work, and he's already on the verge of insanity.

Zhao Yunlan arrives hurriedly and picks up Guo Changcheng by the back of his collar like a small chick, setting him upright on the ground.

If it weren't for keeping his image as the calm and reserved Chief Zhao, he would've smacked the idiot on the head with his shoe.

Zhao Yunlan forces himself to turn away; one more look at this moron and he swears...

"Hi!" He offers the spectacled gentleman a handshake. "The name's Zhao Yunlan, we're from the MPS, and you are?"

For just a split second, the man seems astonished, but he rapidly recovers as if nothing has happened, so Zhao Yunlan thinks he must have imagined it. He politely returns Zhao Yunlan's handshake. "It's Shen, Shen Wei, I'm a professor here. My apologies, I thought he was a student."

Shen Wei's hand is icy, like that of a corpse straight out of a refrigerator. Zhao Yunlan freezes as soon as he touches it, and can't help looking up at Shen Wei, meeting his gaze. Although Shen Wei quickly looks away, Zhao Yunlan finds his expression rather unusual. In an odd way, it doesn't feel like looking at a stranger.

As a criminal investigation officer, albeit the unorthodox type, Zhao Yunlan has to be good at memorising faces, even those that he only glanced at briefly.

He's certain he has never seen this person before.

At this instance, the ball of black fur wiggles his butt and pads towards the Professor. Twisting around his legs, he gives Shen Wei's feet a thorough sniff, circles his leg a few more times, and starts softly purring at him.

Master Da Qing usually keeps his cool and looks down upon all pathetic homo sapiens with disdain and disinterest. Shen Wei seems to be an exception.

Zhao Yunlan is stunned by the cat's abnormal behaviour: he's inexplicably friendly and cute towards Shen Wei, and even stretches out his ridiculously short front legs towards his knee, asking for a hug.

Shen Wei picks up the cat, who meows gently and comfortably, emerald eyes gazing at the spectacled man.

It seems to Zhao Yunlan like they have some kind of connection.

Quite a while later, Shen Wei reluctantly returns the cat to Zhao Yunlan, giving the cat a pat on the head while doing so. "This cat is very smart, what's his name?"

"Da Qing," Zhao Yunlan answers and carelessly adds, "nickname Fatty, also known as That Fat Fuck."

The black cat howls and turns evil instantly, fur standing upright and claws assaulting Zhao Yunlan.

"Haha, he's mad." Shen Wei laughs gently and holds one of the paws in his hand. The cat retracts his claws and eagerly lets Shen

Wei pat him on the head.

"I heard about the incident," Shen Wei says. "So the victim is from our university?"

The Chief glances at Guo Changcheng, who sheepishly takes out a photograph of a female student and a student card, and hands them to Shen Wei with trembling hands, "Pro-Professor Shen, pleased to meet you. Will you take a look and... see if you recognise this person?"



## Chapter 4

The old main building of Dragon City University was built around the 1910s, so it's now at least a hundred years old. Lush woods saturate the campus, some towering above all buildings, which were built in a Western architectural style and are particularly ancient.

The only building that's relatively new is the administrative office situated in the west wing, which also happens to be tall enough not to be blocked by the trees. The multi-storey structure's unusual style stands out like a sore thumb.

Professor Shen says he doesn't recognise this student, and offers to take them to the office to investigate.

Zhao Yunlan is amazed by this modern-looking office building: it has eighteen floors, he realises without counting. In earlier days, property developers would always avoid buildings with eighteen floors, but since the economy boomed and property prices kept rising, people started caring less about superstition and more about money. Only those who know the business can spot the problem right away.<sup>20</sup>

Maybe because of the air conditioning, a chilling breeze meets anyone entering the building. Da Qing the cat shivers a bit, extending his claws and holding on to Zhao Yunlan tightly.

"The student card says 'Faculty of Mathematics'; the office is on the top floor." Shen Wei leads the two into the elevator.

Zhao Yunlan suddenly asks, "Professor Shen, you don't seem to be very curious about this incident? There's nothing you'd like to ask?"

Shen Wei's head is slightly bent, and he softly replies, "I respect the dead, and I'll do whatever I can to help you solve this case, but I



don't need to know the details."

Zhao Yunlan randomly strokes the cat's back and continues, "Rarely do we meet good citizens like you. Even Da Qing seems to have taken a liking to you."

Shen Wei smiles gently. "It's the right thing to do."

Zhao Yunlan stays silent for a while and studies Shen Wei. There's something unusual about the Professor: he has been avoiding eye contact ever since they locked eyes with each other earlier.

The elevator stops abruptly at the fourth floor, lights flickering. Guo Changcheng looks at Chief Zhao in panic and desperation, but Zhao Yunlan is very calm, still intently scrutinising the Professor.

A creepy male voice echoes through the elevator. "Professor Shen, what brings you to the eighteenth floor?"

Shen Wei replies evenly, "There was an accident in the university. These two are from the MPS; I'm taking them to the Faculty of Mathematics for some inquiries."

"Oh..." The voice appears rather slow-witted, and only replies after a long silence, "Right, take care."

Suddenly, the elevator returns to normal and the lights are back on... as if nothing ever happened.

"Scared?" Shen Wei turns around, still avoiding Zhao Yunlan, and explains to Guo Changcheng, "That was the security guard; last semester a student jumped off the building from the top floor. Since then whoever's not from the faculty will be questioned before they can go up to the eighteenth floor."

Guo Changcheng is relieved, and giggles embarrassingly, "And here I thought it was..."

"Something supernatural?" Shen Wei asks, half-jokingly.

Guo Changcheng's face turns a sickly colour<sup>21</sup>.

Zhao Yunlan has other worries: this office building with terrible Feng Shui, and the Professor who inexplicably avoids eye contact—they're equally bizarre.

As for the responsible security guard, perhaps he's not just a security guard after all...

When they finally stagger out onto the eighteenth floor, it's entirely empty and so cold and wet that no mosquito or gecko would ever settle here.

Zhao Yunlan sneezes abruptly.

Shen Wei turns around swiftly. "Do you have a cold?" Although he's still not looking at Zhao Yunlan directly, his query is surprisingly genuine.

Perhaps because of his personal temperament, Professor Shen bows and nods with the air of a perfect gentleman. Even though his expression when talking to Zhao Yunlan is a bit unnatural, it doesn't make him feel uncomfortable.

Zhao Yunlan rubs his nose lightly. "No, I'm just allergic to the smell of mind-boggling, never-ending maths homework."

Shen Wei wears a kind and reserved smile.

"Don't laugh at me," Zhao Yunlan jokes. "I'm telling the truth, Professor Shen. When I was a student, none of the teachers liked me, and my class teacher even said that I would grow up to be a gangster. Who would've thought I'd end up where I am today? When I saw him again years later, guess what he said to me?"

Shen Wei seems to be listening curiously. "What?"

"That cynical old man said: Zhao Yunlan, you see, I was right, you've become a uniformed gangster."

Chief Zhao is experienced in diplomacy and very good with courteous small talk. He can easily put people at ease. This 'maths homework' joke alone has gotten Guo Changcheng quite loosened up; perhaps he empathises with the Chief, and follows him around more eagerly.

But Professor Shen... when he listens to Zhao Yunlan, his expression is so filled with attentiveness and interest that Zhao Yunlan gets the impression what he's saying isn't small talk, but some highly complex and important issue to which Shen Wei must dedicate all his attention. But though he listens, he never looks at Zhao Yunlan; and though his smile appears warm and courteous, the more Zhao Yunlan looks at it the more he realises how formal it is, almost as if painted on.

Zhao Yunlan is suspicious of how his face can keep smiling for so long.

The three walk and talk like this for a while, the sound of their footsteps echoing through the corridors. In amongst that and their laughter, the fourth man's footsteps blend in unnoticed.

Rustling and coarse, like the sound of soft-soled cloth shoes.

The administrative office is built in the style of so-called 'tower buildings': with the elevator in the middle and each floor in a circular shape around the centre.

As they move forward, Guo Changcheng notices that Chief Zhao's wristwatch has been undergoing an uncanny change: from the centre of the watch where the hour and minute hands meet, a touch

of crimson begins to spread like water ripples. Guo Changcheng hesitates for a while, then whispers, "Chief... Chief Zhao, your watch..."

"What? Has it turned red?" Zhao Yunlan turns back with his iconic smirk on his face, "Do you know why?"

Guo Changcheng shakes his head.

"Ghosts love red," Zhao Yunlan says, grinning. "Since this building has bad Feng Shui, there's probably something evil lurking in the shadows, playing tricks on us..."

Guo Changcheng's face turns pale; he turns his head stiffly to look at the watch once more, but this time, he sees the reflection of an old lady. She's rather plump, dressed in all black, and glaring at him vacantly!

Guo Changcheng stops in his tracks.

Zhao Yunlan laughs, flips a small switch on the watch, and the case is suddenly filled with mist, which washes the bloody colour away. The wristwatch instantly returns to normal: no bloody red, and no female ghost.

"You've never seen colour-changing watches? Silly kid, so gullible." Zhao Yunlan teases the trainee, but then swiftly turns to Shen Wei. "Professor Shen, I assume that as an intellectual, you don't believe in ghosts?"

Professor Shen adjusts his glasses, still avoiding eye contact with Zhao Yunlan, and replies slowly, "As the old saying goes: 'The wise never speak of that which is out of this world.' Nobody knows if there are ghosts, so there is no need to dwell on it. If we can't even understand our own lives fully, why should we care about what's beyond us?"

A very educated reply, but it seems Shen Wei didn't really answer the question after all. Since Zhao Yunlan couldn't get anything out of him, he changes the subject, "Professor Shen, you teach the Arts, I suppose?"

"Yes, I teach Chinese and a few Arts electives."

"I see... by the way I heard from some friends in the property business that new residential buildings nowadays are rarely built like this building, only giant commercial buildings are. It really is bad Feng Shui: very little natural light indoors, and difficult to maintain." Zhao Yunlan takes out a pack of cigarettes. "Is smoking forbidden here?"

Shen Wei shakes his head. Zhao Yunlan takes a cigarette and lights it with one hand, the other hand still in his pocket; a cloud of white smoke swirls out of his mouth.

Shen Wei frowns. "Tobacco is bad for your health, Chief Zhao. You're still so young, better not smoke too much."

Zhao Yunlan smiles gently and doesn't reply. Smoke covers his face and obscures his expression; ashes fall from the cigarette and land in Shen Wei's shadow.

Zhao Yunlan looks at the ground, fans away the smoke, and replies, "This job is rather stressful, I often have to work overtime, so, inevitably, I have some bad habits that I just can't get rid of."

Shen Wei looks like he wants to say something, but only frowns, and then unexpectedly changes the topic. "There aren't many faculties that use the old main campus, only a few floors in this building are occupied, the other rooms are all vacant; around this corner and we're there."

Cool and shadowy places are prone to mould and moss, and perhaps also... other things.

For unknown reasons, the corners of this building are close to right angles, while the corridors inside circle around the centre, giving the interior a most bizarre structure and people the possibility of bumping into each other quite often.

Shen Wei leads the group; Zhao Yunlan, holding the cat, follows, and Guo Changcheng comes last. As they approach the corner, Guo Changcheng has an inkling that something might leap out of the shadows. He anxiously stares at the dim corner.

Suddenly, he realises that within the shadows, something is... moving. It's as if someone's hiding there, and from the darkness emerges a shape... it's a hand!

## Chapter 5

The hand darts out of the shadow suddenly, fingers spread wide, and viciously snatches at Shen Wei's foot. Looking straight ahead, he doesn't seem to notice anything.

Zhao Yunlan grabs his arm and abruptly pulls him back half a step.

"Oh right, I just remembered!" Zhao Yunlan says, keeping his eyes on Shen Wei while casually flicking cigarette ash into the shadow. The sinister hand swiftly retreats, as if burned. Sounding impatient, Zhao Yunlan continues, "See how my memory sucks—this case was handed to us on short notice. How can I cooperate with the University? I should chat with your Principal or the Secretary. If it's convenient, could you help me make an appointment?"

Shen Wei finally looks at Zhao Yunlan, and Zhao Yunlan realises only now that the outer corners of Shen Wei's eyes taper into a delicate black line, like a brush stroke on an ink wash painting. From behind the lenses, his captivating gaze almost penetrates the soul.

In the dim corridors, Shen Wei's gaze makes him think of that ghost story in which a demon falls in love with a scholar and paints a picture of him—though the scholar might be bright and mild, the painting will unavoidably be tainted by the artist's demonic nature.

Then, Shen Wei smiles. "Right, I can't be of much help here; the rooms on the south side all belong to the Faculty of Mathematics. Just ask around, and I'll speak with the Principal."

"Thanks." Zhao Yunlan takes a hand out of his pocket and smiles as he shakes hands with Shen Wei. He waves for Guo Changcheng to follow and turns around, heading towards the offices.

After a few steps, Guo Changcheng finds himself looking back.

He notices the Professor hasn't left; he's standing as if rooted in place. He takes off his glasses and wipes them inattentively with the corner of his jacket. Where earlier he had avoided eye contact, he's now focusing unwaveringly on Zhao Yunlan's back. He has a faraway gaze and his expression is a mix of nostalgia, restraint, and yearning that's on the verge of spilling over...and yet, it also seems to contain deep sorrow.

Shen Wei's shadow trails long behind him in the dimly lit hallway, looking lonely and bleak.

Guo Changcheng has a strange feeling that Shen Wei must have waited like that for millenia.

Only after Zhao Yunlan has turned the corner does Shen Wei notice Guo Changcheng looking.

The young Professor smiles politely and puts his glasses back on as if re-donning a mask. He nods goodbye at Guo Changcheng, picks up his lesson plan, turns and disappears into the elevator, as if everything just now had been the terrified little intern's illusion.

"Chief Zhao, that guy..."

"Have you noticed that this isn't the so-called office of the Faculty of Mathematics?" Zhao Yunlan interrupts him. He swipes some dirt off the dusty window sill and rubs it between his fingertips. "Do you think it's an accident, or did Professor Shen trick us intentionally?"

Maybe because Zhao Yunlan has a young vibe to him, or perhaps because he's always easy-going and cordial, Guo Changcheng's courage gradually grows bit by bit and he asks, "Then why let him go? I mean, if he tricked us intentionally, then why..."



Zhao Yunlan holds a cigarette in one hand; the other is buried in his pocket as he looks at Guo Changcheng through a cloud of smoke. Guo Changcheng falls silent.

"He's a normal human, I checked just now. You're a newcomer; it's all right if you don't understand these matters. We'll teach you bit by bit." Zhao Yunlan lowers his voice. "Generally, we have the same authority as our colleagues from other departments. When there's no evidence, we can ask questions, require citizens to cooperate with our investigation, we can even arrest suspects and interrogate them; but there's one important rule: under no circumstances can we let a normal citizen we've arrested get into danger, because if something happens to them there's no way to make it right."

His tone isn't harsh, it's rather gentle, but maybe it's the chill in the hallway that's making Guo Changcheng shiver.

Zhao Yunlan's back is turned to him as he continues, "You've probably realised by now that we tend to get rather abnormal cases, many of which cannot be resolved through regular legal prosecution, and so we have the power to execute criminals on the spot. That could be a dangerous power, and that's why there's a set of rules we must follow. Do you know what the first rule is?"

Guo Changcheng shakes his head numbly, but when he realises Zhao Yunlan can't see him, he blushes.

"Regardless of whether we're dealing with a human or a ghost, if there's no compelling evidence, we must presume innocence." Zhao Yunlan gives the black cat a pat on the butt. "And you, damn fatty, what were you doing just now, fawning like a stupid dog?"

The black cat claws at Zhao Yunlan unceremoniously, bounces off him, and aggressively walks in front of them. "I just think there's something strange about that Professor Shen; I can't tell what, but being close to him makes me comfortable."

"Ghosts make you very comfortable too. You even like to hide your dried fish in coffins," Zhao Yunlan points out coldly.

The black cat flicks his tail and says disdainfully, "You know what I mean, stupid human."

Guo Changcheng is left speechless.

The corridor gets darker the further they walk ahead, like a never-ending, gloomy maze. Zhao Yunlan lights the way with his lighter; a small flame flickering uncomfortably in the darkness.

The smile disappears from Zhao Yunlan's face. Lit by the flame he looks unhealthily pale and exhausted, but his gaze is very focused, even deeper than the darkness surrounding him.

There's a rotten smell coming from the dark depths and Guo Changcheng covers his nose.

"I hate going around this corridor in circles," Zhao Yunlan says softly. "I hate anything that's circular, like an infinite cycle of life and death."

His words are already stressing Guo Changcheng to breaking point when he hears a sudden click, like that of a loading pistol. Soft air against his neck makes him jump, then he hears Zhao Yunlan say evenly, "Move aside."

It's as if he's casually asking someone to 'move aside' because he's coming through with a hot bowl of dumplings.

Without waiting for any more instructions, Guo Changcheng throws himself to the ground, scared witless.

Gunfire rings out in the dark, followed by a piercing scream from behind. If Guo Changcheng had fur, it would stick up even more than Da Qing's when someone touches his butt. He feels like he's having

a heart attack: his heart pounds frantically and his chest hurts intensely.

He sits on the floor, awkwardly looking up in the dim light of Zhao Yunlan's lighter, and sees a shadow the size of a five-year-old child. At first glance, it looks like a layer of ink smeared on the wall. In its centre is a 'bullet hole', red seeping out of it as if it could bleed.

"What is that?!" Guo Changcheng squeals, his voice even higher than usual.

"It's just a shadow, don't overreact." Zhao Yunlan wipes over the shadow with his hand, and the blood-red liquid comes away at his fingertips like paint peeling off a damp old wall.

"What... a fake shadow?"

Zhao Yunlan pauses, and suddenly gives him a sideways glance. He smiles weirdly, making Guo Changcheng feel as if his soul was seized by his frightening dark eyes. Then he says, in a low voice that makes Guo Changcheng's hair stand on end, "You know, sometimes, a person can have more than one shadow."

Guo Changcheng drops against the wall, sliding down like a bunch of cooked noodles.

Zhao Yunlan stays silent.

"This is all your fault." Da Qing, his tail raised, circles the unconscious Guo Changcheng. The unlucky little intern is maintaining his 'one-collapse-a-day' record. The cat swishes his tail in discontent. "What good does it do you to make him pass out?"

"I didn't mean to." Zhao Yunlan nudges the body gently with his foot, but the intern just slides even further down, unresponsive. "How would I know he'd pass out so easily? At worst, I thought he'd... pee his pants or something."

Da Qing doesn't know what to say to that.

Zhao Yunlan slings Guo Changcheng on his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "Then the cost of adult diapers could have come out of his bonus." His movements are brisk and the body is bouncing about. Coolly, he says, "So tell me, this kid must have some connections, or he would've never gotten a job here."

"I heard his uncle is one of the big guys in the MPS."

Straightfaced, Zhao Yunlan asks, "Doesn't that idiot know we don't take new recruits directly from other departments at the SIU? Or maybe he figured a line-of-duty death would be a good way for his nephew to go?"

"If you're so tough, don't complain to me," Da Qing meows. "You call him an idiot behind his back, but if you ever see him you'd greet him as the big boss; I've lived for a few thousand years, and I've never seen a Guardian with as little integrity as you."

"Integrity doesn't pay the bills." Zhao Yunlan stubs out the cigarette and softly pats the kitty on the head. "Also, I'm asking you and your colleagues who have nothing to do all day to consult your conscience. What about your huge monthly pay cheque, regular bonuses, the benefits paid for the New Year's festival, and the right to not be obstructed and disturbed by other departments; they don't fall from the fucking sky, do they? What the hell is integrity, is it edible? Is it tasty?"

Da Qing, who's been eating imported cat food to the point that his size is also becoming international, falls silent and shuts up.

Generations of Guardians<sup>22</sup> have been responsible for affairs of the Underworld in the realm of the living. Even if he doesn't show it, the Guardian has always felt like an outsider among humans. Rarely has

there ever been a Guardian so close to the living world as Zhao Yunlan.

Not only is he close to the living, he's smooth and slick at establishing social relations. He's completely at home in both realms, whether he's meeting officials in the Underworld or attending banquets topside. He'll drink with anyone and knows how to get them to drink with him, and he'll call everyone 'brother' even as he's cursing them out in his head.

He's your classic bad boy, gentleman, and rogue all in one. He does 'kind and friendly' well, and he does 'bad and nasty' even better.

The old cat looks on coldly. If it weren't for his 'unfortunately' inheriting the Guardian Token, Zhao Yunlan, with his diverse skill set, probably would've climbed up the social ladder pretty fast.

## Chapter 6

Unwilling to bite the hand that feeds him, Da Qing coughs dryly and changes the subject. "What just happened back there in the corridor? Why did your 'revealing mirror' activate an alarm?"

"Something was tailing us," Zhao Yunlan says, "but it ran away as soon as I shone a light on it; probably meant no harm."

"Not the killer?"

"How could it be? You think I can't tell the difference between new ghosts and evil phantoms?" Zhao Yunlan is still carrying Guo Changcheng around the corridors. "Besides, you saw the hand print next to the corpse, didn't you? Bones as thin as wood, fingers as long as a whip. Whatever that was, it was definitely not human... damn, this dude is heavy, I'm gonna put him down somewhere." With that Zhao Yunlan casually throws Guo Changcheng down in a corner.

He looks down at him indifferently for a while, as if deciding to leave and let the guy fend for himself. After a while, though, he kneels down and takes out a small bottle. He pours some substance around Guo Changcheng in a circle, then bites his finger and smears a drop of blood onto Guo Changcheng's forehead. The blood is instantly sucked into his skin, and the pale trainee looks much better at once. Zhao Yunlan slaps his head lightly, and curses under his breath. "Good for nothing, you're such a bother."

"Stop it, Yunlan, look at your watch."

Zhao Yunlan looks down, and his revealing watch has turned red again. Da Qing squeals at his feet, and when he follows the cat's line

of sight, he sees an elderly figure dressed in a dark shroud standing behind them.

The figure turns and walks away, but after two steps it stops; it seems to be leading them somewhere.

"A new ghost?" Da Qing rushes forward on his short legs, meowing and grumbling. "In broad daylight... it's got to be out of its mind."

"Shut it, can't you see she's mute? And can't you see she's still alive? She's walking on two legs instead of floating mid-air! Have you lost your cat mind, fatty?" When they round a sharp corner, the old woman has disappeared. In front of them is a staircase leading to the roof of the building.

Da Qing sneezes and huffs, "What a big whiff of resentment."

Zhao Yunlan picks him up. "Looks like it's not Professor Shen but the old lady who led us here; let's go up take a look."

Man and cat carefully mount the stairs, which feel squishy and alive under their feet. Countless creatures reach out from the shadows of darkness and grab at these living creatures that dare intrude into their domain, but they are viciously repelled as soon as they touch Zhao Yunlan's trouser legs.

"Every school has a suicide quota every year, so as long as no more people die than that, it's not a big problem," Zhao Yunlan says. "But I hear that Dragon City University has exceeded the limit for three consecutive years. The buildings in the original campus are old and not high, so you can't be sure you'll die if you jump off them. Only this new high-rise building seems tall enough to be suitable. In addition, the maze-like interior structure must have trapped quite a few nasty things; their resentment would accumulate over time."

They're at the top of the stairs, but the rusty iron door to the roof is closed, weak light shining through the crack. Zhao Yunlan takes out

an access card and opens it. Then he holds up his lighter and slowly heads for the roof.

From the rooftop of the eighteenth floor, one can get a full view of the lush Dragon City University campus and the hustling and bustling city centre. A girl stands on the rooftop, facing outwards. Zhao Yunlan carefully probes, "Hey, student..."

Before he gets any further, the girl climbs over the railing and jumps off! Zhao Yunlan instinctively rushes forward and tries to grab her. His hand touches the girl's back, but it goes right through her. The girl disappears, like a mirage.

The black cat bounces forward like a ball. "Well? Was it a human?"

"I'm not sure, she was too fast." Zhao Yunlan unconsciously rubs his fingers. "I didn't have time to tell whether..."

Zhao Yunlan was born possessing the third eye. Since childhood, he has been able to see ghosts. But because of this ability, it's hard for him to tell human from ghost if he doesn't take a closer look.

The black cat is about to say something, but pounding footsteps approach from behind. Turning, Zhao Yunlan sees the same girl, head down, walking slowly up to the top floor. Her face is blurred, her expression unreadable. Before Zhao Yunlan can open his mouth, she speeds up, as if rushing to the cafeteria, and lunges out from the top of the building.

Zhao Yunlan reaches out and grabs her shoulder, but the same thing happens: his hand goes right through her, and she disappears.

Afterwards, it's like jumping off a building has become the new fashion; one after another, blurred girls rush forward from all over to fling themselves down. Zhao Yunlan tries to grab every one of them, but none of them are tangible. In a short while, he's soaked in sweat.



Da Qing has given up by the eighth girl and sits like a statue beside the frantic Zhao Yunlan, tail flipping impatiently left and right like a pendulum. "Stop chasing after them. It's either an earthbound spirit or a remnant illusion from a former suicide."

Zhao Yunlan ignores him.

Zhao Yunlan is quick with his fists and has had training; beating up a handful of hooligans is no problem for him. But his physique is average, his life irregular, and he doesn't exercise enough. After a few rounds, he's quite out of breath. The black cat sighs. "One or two, okay, but three? And you've caught eight! Can't you tell she isn't human?"

"How do you know they're all the same person? What's your evidence that I'm the only person here? When the next one comes, are you sure we're still in the same space? When she comes out, can you tell straight away if she's human or a dummy? Rule number three: 'Make no assumptions'. Have you eaten the rules along with your cat food?" Zhao Yunlan gives the cat a stern glare.

When faced with strength, the foul-mouthed cat is weak. He waves his tail feebly and mutters, "Trying to teach me! I'm a few thousand years old, and you little brat dare pose as a leader and teach me..."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't back down. "If you don't shut up I'm going to cut down on your cat food."

A wise cat trims his sails, and Da Qing changes his tone quickly. "Meow..."

Just then, the ninth suicidal girl comes rushing forward. Zhao Yunlan shouts, "Hey girl, wait!!!" She ignores him, and sprints forward like an arrow.

"Fucking hell!" Zhao Yunlan's hand meets air again, and forgetting all his righteous sermons, he furiously slams his hand on the cold, hard

railing.

"Hmmm..." Da Qing comes over, two front paws on the railing, and gives the area a thorough sniff. "Actually you might be right. While earthbound spirits sometimes resemble broken records, trapped in an endless loop of their own death, they're usually not in such a hurry to die."

"Then what is it?" Zhao Yunlan asks.

"It's resentment." Da Qing wears a solemn expression on his plump, puffy face. "Suicide is an unnatural cause of death, so these spirits have a high chance of not being able to reincarnate. Some of these spirits are trapped between the realms of the living and the dead, and they become incomplete and forget about their identities."

"A place with a lot of resentment certainly makes you uncomfortable, but it's not harmful, is it?" Zhao Yunlan asks.

"It probably isn't. But since resentment comes from spirit fragments, when more gather they might become strong enough to solidify. That girl might be the result of countless shattered spirits forming resentment."

"What happens when they solidify?"

"Nothing, really. Resentment is different from wrath; it's not as vicious. Only those who are infested with ghosts in the first place are haunted by resentment. Resentment definitely doesn't have the power to touch the girl, let alone cut open her stomach," the black cat explains. "So I think we'd better leave. There's nothing for us here."

Zhao Yunlan hesitates.

The cat sighs. "Oh you. When you're meant to be principled, you mess around, but when you're supposed to be flexible, you get

stubborn. The Guardian Token has been passed down through millennia; those rules don't matter anymore. Do you really have to be so obsessive?"

"No, but I still think..." Zhao Yunlan falls silent as the tenth girl approaches.

Man and cat tense as the girl rushes forward, leaps over the fence, and makes a suicidal jump like all her predecessors.

Zhao Yunlan senses something different and pounces forward with all his might, grabbing the girl by her waist. The blue veins on his hands bulge as he struggles to pull the girl back up; this time, it's a real, actual person.

The black cat is astonished and quickly leaps onto the fence, emerald eyes staring intently.

Zhao Yunlan is in an awkward position; it takes all his strength to hold on to the girl and he can't pull her back up. His leg is trapped in the railing and his whole upper body is about to succumb to gravity. The girl dangles dangerously from the eighteenth floor. Suddenly, she realises her position, lets out an ear-splitting scream, and starts struggling instinctively.

Zhao Yunlan shouts desperately, "If you keep moving, you're gonna be street pizza! Stay put!"

At this instant, the railing cracks; maybe it's old or it just can't handle a person's weight. At any rate, it's coming loose.

Zhao Yunlan seems not to have noticed and continues, "Stay calm, don't be afraid, you hang in there..."

Suddenly, with a loud 'clang', the railing breaks.

Zhao Yunlan hears eerie laughter—it's as if the roof were full of people, a whole crowd standing by indifferently, gloating and giggling. Da Qing screeches frantically, "Meow!!!"

In the nick of time, a man kicks open the door to the rooftop and rushes forward with lightning speed, just as the railing starts to fall. Zhao Yunlan instantly shifts his weight to his heels, just in time to push the girl into the arms of the person who dashed over.

Next, he's stepping on air, barely hanging on to the edge of the roof. Da Qing finally realises: the person who has rushed forward is Professor Shen.

Shen Wei instantly pushes the girl behind him and grabs hold of the precariously wobbling Zhao Yunlan. "Give me your hand, and the other one, quick!"

# Chapter 7

Zhao Yunlan, never one to politely refuse help, just lets go and entrusts his life to Shen Wei, as if he weren't dangling from the eighteenth floor and in danger of splattering onto the pavement like rotten fruit.

The Professor may look gentle, but he's incredibly strong.

Zhao Yunlan's wrists are going numb in his grip, his hands turning purple, as Shen Wei pulls him up so forcefully that his sleeve rubs a layer of skin off his elbow.

Shen Wei wraps his arms around Zhao Yunlan and the two land in a heap on the ground.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't want to weigh the Professor down, so he supports himself on his hands; but his wrists are bruised and Shen Wei seems to be holding him exceptionally tight... not like the instinctive grip of someone falling, but like a powerful embrace.

Of course, Shen Wei recovers his wits eventually; as Zhao Yunlan starts to struggle, he releases him at once, pushing up his glasses to cover any emotion.

Zhao Yunlan has been around the block a few times and is good at reading people. In Shen Wei's clumsy reaction he keenly senses a hint of embarrassment, which Shen Wei has no intention to display in front of someone else.

Zhao Yunlan gets up and, pretending not to have noticed, takes out a pack of tissue paper and proceeds to wipe the dust, blood and dirt off his arm with a wince. "I'm glad you came back, or I'd have been the clock pendulum for Dragon City University."

Shen Wei, still in shock, doesn't reply.

"And you, what's wrong with you?" Zhao Yunlan decides to give Shen Wei a break, and starts firing questions at the girl. "Boyfriend broke up with you? Got told off by the teacher? Failed your exams? Kids these days, you're so well off, you can even afford an education; what, were you just bored to death and decided to get into trouble?"

The poor girl's crying turns to bawling and Zhao Yunlan falls silent.

Suddenly, Professor Shen says, "It's too dangerous."

"Totally," Zhao Yunlan continues at once. "You hear your teacher? That was way too dangerous, don't you get that? All right, stop crying and let's get down. I'll take you to the hospital, and I'm gonna have to call your parents..."

Shen Wei gets up with a glance at Zhao Yunlan; then he puts on a stern face and turns towards the girl. For a full minute he just glares at her, while she gets ever more intimidated, her bawling turning into small choking sounds and hiccups.

The Professor reminds Zhao Yunlan of his dead grandpa, who was also an experienced intellectual and a gentleman; he was always friendly and benign and would never resort to harsh words or violence, no matter how furious he was. But his angered glares were always more than enough to teach the kids a lesson.

"If someone else died because of you, how could you live with that?" Shen Wei admonishes her gravely.

The girl mumbles, "Yes... I'm sorry..."

Zhao Yunlan on the other hand finds this a little embarrassing. He rubs his nose. "Well, look, I'm still fine; but you really need to think

hard about this. Think of your parents, think of yourself and your life ahead of you, you're still so young. Come now, stop crying, I'll take you to the infirmary."

He glances at Shen Wei, who shows no reaction, and so he helps the girl up and supports her on the walk downstairs. There, the unconscious Guo Changcheng is still propped up in the corner like before. Da Qing runs forward and wakes him up by clawing at his face.

The suicide scene has attracted the attention of a crowd; the previously deserted corridor is now full of people. Many teachers have come to find out what happened. Under their curious gaze, Guo Changcheng comes to with an inhuman scream.

He opens his eyes, blood streaming down his face, to see his Chief standing nearby, awkwardly holding a young girl and saying, "You need some physical training. You can't do this job if you keep passing out."

In full view of the public, Guo Changcheng doesn't dare say anything, but he knows what's going on, and lowers his head in shame.

Zhao Yunlan considers, then says, "Well, I still have something to take care of here; how about you go with Da Qing and investigate the victim's background? Do you think you can handle that on your own?"

When he hears the emphasis added to 'on your own', Da Qing licks his paws, self-satisfied, and gives a naughty "meow". Guo Changcheng shivers.

This is a glorious but challenging mission; afraid, Guo Changcheng raises his head, looking reluctant and miserable. Zhao Yunlan ignores his silent complaint, benevolently pats him on the head, then looks at Da Qing and leaves without a word.

Shen Wei still looks stern, and he hasn't said a word. Someone asks him in a whisper what happened, but he only shakes his head absentmindedly.

He steps out of sight and puts his hand between his collarbones. The shape of a pendant can be seen through his shirt.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and follows Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan asks the girl on the way down, "What's your name?"

"Li Qian."

"Which faculty are you from? Which year?"

"Foreign Languages, postgraduate year one."

"Were you born here?"

Li Qian hesitates, then nods slowly.

"So why did you do it?"

Li Qian stays silent.

Zhao Yunlan thoughtfully looks at Li Qian: her eyes are baggy and her gaze is listless and bloodshot. She looks unhealthy<sup>23</sup> and down on her luck.

Professor Shen suddenly says, "The Foreign Languages Faculty has high requirements for liberal arts and general elective credits. Have you ever taken my class?"

Li Qian gives him a careful look, and nods.

"I mentioned in class," Shen Wei says, his voice as if giving a lecture; low and pleasant at a comfortable speed, "there are only two



things in this world that are worth dying for. One is your family and country; that is to fulfil the requirements of loyalty and filial piety. The other is your closest loved ones<sup>24</sup>; that is for self-fulfilment. Apart from those, any kind of suicide is a cowardly act. Do you understand?"

"I..." Li Qian's voice quivers, and she quickly presses her lips together. "I'm sorry, Professor Shen, I really... I only did it on an impulse, I didn't think it through, and it almost got..."

She looks up at Zhao Yunlan and back down again quickly.

Chief Zhao is very handsome, and he's wearing a friendly smile, but when Li Qian meets his eyes, she instinctively shuffles closer to Shen Wei.

Zhao Yunlan lights a cigarette, and looks at her with that smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Young student, I've heard of killing someone on impulse, but not killing yourself on impulse. It's almost as if you were... possessed."

When she hears 'possessed', Li Qian pales.

Zhao Yunlan keeps digging. "What are you afraid of? Tell me, did you see something on the rooftop?"

Li Qian laughs unconvincingly. "It's just... the rooftop, what could I have seen?"

"Well, I saw something." Zhao Yunlan stares into space and blows out a cloud of smoke. "When you jumped down, there was a crowd on the rooftop, and they were all laughing at you."

Li Qian trembles and holds her arms tightly; her teeth chatter.

Zhao Yunlan sizes her up for a while, flicks away some ashes, and then puts his hand on her shoulder. "Well, go inside; this is the

university hospital." He says hello to the teacher on duty at the door, hands Li Qian over to Shen Wei, and stays outside, still smoking.

The hospital of Dragon City University has an artificial river at the entrance, with a small bridge across it. Zhao Yunlan leans lazily against the wooden railing and slowly exhales smoke onto his watch. The white smoke soon dissipates, and a thin mist condenses inside the watch. Shortly after, the face of an elderly woman appears inside the watch, staring out at Zhao Yunlan through the glass.

Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrows. "The old cat might have been right," he murmurs to himself, "it's a new ghost that died less than a week ago. Appearing on the 'revealing mirror' in broad daylight... that takes a special kind of bravery. Old lady, what kind of powerful being are you?"

When he hears footsteps from behind, Zhao Yunlan quickly wipes over the watch and the image disappears. He turns around, and sees Shen Wei approach, carrying a small tray.

Shen Wei sets down the tray with wet wipes and medicine on it, drops his eyes and unceremoniously takes Zhao Yunlan's grazed arm, carefully rolls up his sleeve, and grabs the distilled water from the tray.

"It's okay," Zhao Yunlan says quickly, "I can do it myself."

"How would you do it yourself?" Shen Wei washes the wound with water, and dries it with cotton pads as if he were taking care of a newborn baby. "Tell me if it hurts."

Zhao Yunlan is a bit uncomfortable and steps backwards, "I'm fine, really, it just needs a rinse with tap water."

Shen Wei does not look up. "It's a hot day; what if it gets infected?"

Shen Wei has long eyelashes, when he looks down he has delicate features, the shape of his eyelids so clear that they seem to be painted. His glasses obscure a lot, so at first glance he doesn't seem striking, but at a closer look he's very attractive.

Zhao Yunlan's wayward heart tingles.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't consider himself gay, but his taste is certainly wider than most people's: whether it's a man or a woman, anyone who's pretty enough rings his bell.

He'll go after anyone who moves, but he's a decent type; even though he doesn't discriminate, he won't go after two people at once. If he falls for someone, he's determined and loyal; so maybe he's not too shabby a lover.

But his last relationship ended about half a year ago, and Professor Shen is very much his type; it's hard to resist the temptation.

Should he go for it or leave him alone?

Shen Wei looks like he's a very serious type of person.

Zhao Yunlan is very much aware of what he has to offer: a bizarre and unconventional career, endless social engagements full of drinking and partying. His life's a mess. He drives an expensive car, sure, but he lives in a dog's lair. He isn't exactly boyfriend material, let alone the guy you'd want to settle down with and marry. He should probably stay away from someone who's decent and well-educated, but...

The young Professor seems attracted to Zhao Yunlan, and he's such a catch too; it would be such a shame to let him slip through his fingers.

Shen Wei finishes cleaning up Zhao Yunlan's arm and applying medicine, he's about to bandage it with gauze.

Zhao Yunlan stops him. "It's just a scratch, the gauze is unnecessary. It's such a hot day, and I don't wanna look like a mummy." He puts out his cigarette and wraps his arm casually around Shen Wei's back. "Let's go take a look at the girl, shall we?"

Shen Wei freezes like a statue and stumbles forward a few steps, his ears and neck flushing in a rush of pink. He scrambles to break free of Zhao Yunlan's grip and pretends to stay calm while straightening his shirt.

"What are you so shy about?" Zhao Yunlan laughs carelessly, and then, before Shen Wei can catch his breath, he changes the subject. "Have we met before, Professor Shen?"

## Chapter 8

Caught off guard, Shen Wei locks eyes with Zhao Yunlan and his mind goes blank. For a few seconds, he stares vacantly at Zhao Yunlan. He can't tear his gaze away.

Shen Wei knows he really lost self-control today... he shouldn't have met Zhao Yunlan in the first place.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't know anything; he doesn't remember anything... he came to the River, crossed the Bridge, drank the Tea of Forgetfulness<sup>25</sup>, passed the Six Realms of Existence and completed reincarnation. His soul has long been washed clean; how could he remember anything?

Shen Wei stares intently at his handsome face and his piercing gaze; he really wants to lift his hand and touch him, to feel his warmth again after all those cold years.

Eventually, he clears his throat and says hoarsely, "I've met you before..."

Zhao Yunlan awaits his explanation.

*Countless times, in my heart. I never had the courage to find you, but I know everything about you....* Shen Wei almost says it out loud, but he restrains himself, and stutters, "In a case you worked on."

"Which one?" Zhao Yunlan is surprised.

Shen Wei becomes more fluent; after the first lie he no longer hesitates. "The twelve suicides at the Twin Tower, around five or six years ago; I was about to graduate back then, and I was looking for

a cheap flat, so I chose the Twin Tower. The suicides had caused the price to plummet."

Zhao Yunlan frowns and considers. "I am sure I never saw you there."

"You didn't see me, but I was living on the top floor and I saw you, I even saw..." Shen Wei pauses for a moment and produces an astonished expression. "I even saw you pull a dark shadow from a room, and stuff it into a bottle. And then you said, 'The criminal is caught, let's call it a day.'"

Zhao Yunlan is startled. "You lived on the top floor? You're really quite fearless."

Shen Wei lowers his head. "You can check the accommodation records. I'm not lying."

Of course he's not lying, he really lived there at the time, but only because he wanted to secretly take a peek at a certain someone, not for some stupid reason like looking for a place to stay. He's told mostly the truth, but this one lie almost exhausts him.

Zhao Yunlan seems to be convinced, and even jokes, "Negligence, it's my negligence; we ought to erase the memories of normal citizens who got involved, but I somehow missed you. So, how did it make you feel? Did it make you question everything you believed in?"

Shen Wei smiles with difficulty, and doesn't reply. And whether Zhao Yunlan believes him or not, he doesn't pursue the matter.

As they enter the university hospital, they see Li Qian sitting by the window, clasping a glass of hot sugar water one of the nurses has given her. She's looking down at her own shadow, sad and depressed.

When Zhao Yunlan knocks on the door, she jumps in fear, and only relaxes when she recognizes Zhao Yunlan and Shen Wei.

Zhao Yunlan glances at his watch; the reflection of the old lady is still there, but the watch hasn't turned red... weirdly, this new ghost seems to be gaining life energy.

How can a dead person have an aura of life around her? Perhaps she's about to reincarnate?

Zhao Yunlan sits down on the bed next to Li Qian. "I have a few questions for you."

Li Qian looks at him wanly.

Since Professor Shen clearly knows about Zhao Yunlan's line of work, Zhao Yunlan isn't afraid to ask in front of him. "Lately, have you been seeing things you shouldn't be able to see?"

Li Qian looks terrified and remains silent.

"Understood." Zhao Yunlan stares at her forehead and leans forward slightly, propping his elbows on his knees for a closer look. "But your Third Eye hasn't opened, so you shouldn't be able to see these things; is it because of your fate, or did you touch something you weren't supposed to touch?"

Li Qian bites her lip and twists her fingers uncomfortably.

"Oh? So it's the latter." Zhao Yunlan lowers his voice. "Tell me, what did you touch?"

Li Qian refuses to talk, and Zhao Yunlan laughs coldly. "If you don't tell me, then you can live the rest of your life being haunted by it. Haven't you heard of 'curiosity killed the cat'? Some things are better left untouched."

"A sundial." Li Qian pauses for a long time, but finally goes on, "It's an antique passed down for generations in my family, it has many tiny rocks like fish scales on it, it's black, the elderly call it..."

"The Sundial of Reincarnation," Zhao Yunlan says.

Li Qian gives him a surprised look, and nods hesitantly.

"The sundial completes a full circle every day, day after day, and it symbolises the eternal cycle of life, death and reincarnation." Zhao Yunlan pauses slightly before continuing, "But there's also another saying, that reincarnation is a constant process of killing: the past is lost, and there's no turning back; when someone reincarnates, the old life is destroyed, and there's no option but to move forward to a new life."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't realise it, but Shen Wei behind him is trembling. "What did you do with it?" he asks.

Li Qian bites her lip.

"All right, I'll rephrase: did you do anything bad with it?"

Li Qian's eyes widen. "I didn't!"

Zhao Yunlan gazes at her silently.

"I didn't!" Li Qian stands up and stumbles backwards. She hunches over and faces Zhao Yunlan sideways, defensively. "Why would I use a family heirloom to do something bad? You don't know what you're talking about! You..." She's very agitated and starts coughing heavily.

Shen Wei frowns and steps forward to comfort her. "Slow down: easy, easy." He turns around and says to Zhao Yunlan, "She has been through a lot already, Chief Zhao. Can you be a little more gentle with her?"



Zhao Yunlan rubs his nose. "All right, I'll leave out the irrelevant questions; one last question and I'm out of here."

He takes out the photograph of the victim. "Have you seen this student recently?"

Li Qian glances at the picture, and shakes her head; but a moment later she thinks of something, and grabs hold of the photo. She examines it closely, and says uncertainly, "I might have seen someone like her yesterday; she looked just a... just a bit like her..."

Zhao Yunlan tenses. "When exactly yesterday? What was she wearing?"

"At night." Li Qian pauses for thought. "I was on my way back after the library was closed, around ten o'clock. I left campus to buy something, and I saw her at the entrance... I don't really remember her clothes... Oh! Right, I remember, she wore the orientation camp T-shirt; I have the same T-shirt, so I noticed her."

"Did a lot of people wear that T-shirt yesterday?"

"Most of the new students are in the new campus. Among those of us here at the old main one, only few would have that T-shirt."

"Were you wearing it, too?"

"I didn't want to wear it directly on my skin because it wasn't washed yet, so I wore it on top of my clothes; then it was a little hot, so I just stuffed it in my bag."

"Oh." Zhao Yunlan hesitates. "When you saw her, were there people around?"

"Yes, quite a few people were passing by, and there were quite a few cars as well." Li Qian senses something from Zhao Yunlan's

expression, and asks, "What's wrong?"

"No, I'm not talking about College Road, I'm talking about the little alley at the side entrance of the University. She went from there, right? Was there anyone else there at the time?"

Zhao Yunlan hasn't answered her question directly, and that makes Li Qian feel uneasy. Her eyes drift to the side, and first she nods, then shakes her head in confusion. "I... I don't really remember... maybe? She might have gone from there, but I didn't follow her in; that alley is a dead end, only those of us living on the East Campus would take it as a shortcut, so it's usually relatively quiet..."

"You didn't go from there?" Zhao Yunlan interrupts her.

"Ah? Ah... I didn't..."

"But don't you also live on the East Campus?"

"I..." Li Qian runs out of words, and stammers for a while, before she says, panicked, "I took a detour to go buy something..."

"Didn't you say you were just coming back to campus after buying something outside?" Zhao Yunlan interrupts her again, his tone becoming more stern, "I'd like to be nice to you, but you've got to cooperate with the investigation. Tell me the truth, okay?"

Li Qian tenses up again, and clutches at her clothes. "I *am* telling the truth."

"Her name is Lu Ruomei, she's also a postgraduate student here. You ask me what happened last night? I'm telling you now, your classmate died." Zhao Yunlan utters every word slowly, glaring at Li Qian, "Estimated time of death around ten o'clock... which means, you may well be the last person who saw her alive."

Li Qian's pupils contract; the glass slips from her hand, crashes to the ground, and breaks. She's horrified, her eyelids twitching and her fingers trembling, and her lips turn pale.



## Chapter 9

Zhao Yunlan crosses his feet and pulls his knees up, wrapping his arms around them. "Why are you so agitated? If you didn't know the victim and her death has nothing to do with you, why are you afraid now? Why did you take a detour last night? What made you take a longer route rather than take that path?"

Li Qian shrieks, sits down as her legs give out, and covers her face with her hair.

Zhao Yunlan pulls one hand down by the wrist. "You can't run away from it; look at me and tell me what you really saw."

Li Qian shakes off his grip so violently that the hospital bed moves, iron feet scraping on the floor.

"I don't know!" she shouts hysterically. "I don't know! Don't ask me anything! I don't know anything!"

"Your campus isn't very big." Zhao Yunlan lowers his voice. "You must have seen her or met her somewhere, perhaps a study room, the library, or the cafeteria... Do you want to know how she died? When we found her, her body was lying all alone in that small alley. Her stomach was slashed open and emptied; there were teeth marks on some remaining guts, so I personally deduce that the murderer ate her internal organs. There was blood... well, everywhere; they still haven't managed to clean the stains completely, and you know what..."

Li Qian squeals in terror.

Zhao Yunlan remains coldly unmoved; he has no intention of letting go of her. "When her stomach was slashed open, she was still alive;

she could watch her liver, her kidneys, her guts being eaten one by one... she would've heard the crunching and munching of her own organs, can you imagine?"

Mute, Li Qian curls up into a ball and buries her head in her hands.

The school nurse on duty has heard the screaming and rushes in. "What's wrong?"

Zhao Yunlan shoves his ID under his nose and shuts the door in his face, saying, "Excuse me, police investigation, give me five more minutes, thanks."

Arms crossed, he turns and leans against the door, looking at Li Qian. For the third time, he says, "Tell me, what did you see?"

"A shadow..." she says suddenly.

Zhao Yunlan's expression grows deeply serious. He strides over and squats beside her. "What kind of shadow?"

"Please be careful," Shen Wei takes care to remind them, and picks up a broom to clean up the shattered glass. "Should I see myself out? Li Qian, how about I get you another glass of water?"

Zhao Yunlan waves his hand. "No, it's good you're here. I didn't bring a female colleague along, and if it's just the two of us in here it wouldn't be appropriate."

He helps Li Qian get up and hands her a pack of tissues from the bedside table. "What kind of shadow? Think closely."

"We crossed paths and I saw her wearing the T-shirt, so I knew she was a fellow student. I greeted her although we didn't know each other; but she just said 'Excuse me' and rushed past me, and then..." Li Qian raises her reddened eyes and trembles. "I looked down, and I saw her shadow... she had more than one, she had two shadows."

Shen Wei says softly, "Multiple light sources could create multiple shadows, perhaps..."

"No, not like that!" Li Qian interrupts tremulously. "The shadow appeared where there was no light, and it was much darker than normal; and most importantly, that shadow... that shadow was moving all on its own!"

The room is eerily silent, and Li Qian is on the verge of shaking apart. Shen Wei leans forward and pats her head for a bit of reassurance. "Please calm down."

"I really saw it, Professor Shen, I really saw it." Li Qian grabs the hem of his jacket and bursts into tears. "I saw it follow her all the way, and when she went into that alley, it suddenly... it suddenly stood up like an actual person. I was scared to death and I ran, and ran... I thought I was dreaming, it was just an illusion, you know? But now you had to tell me that she's... she's..."

She pushes Shen Wei away, dashes to the corner of the room, and vomits.

Shen Wei gives Zhao Yunlan a reproachful look.

Zhao Yunlan rubs his nose and says, "Uh, don't worry, her reaction could have been worse; you didn't see it, but this morning at the scene, one of our rookies almost vomited out his own intestines."

Shen Wei looks at Zhao Yunlan helplessly and shakes his head. He asks the nurse at the door for some mineral water, let's Li Qian gargle her mouth and helps her get up.

Li Qian's legs are shaky; she stumbles to the bed with Shen Wei's help, sits down and looks dully at Zhao Yunlan. "It killed her, and I saw it, so it's coming after me; it won't let me go, will it?"

Zhao Yunlan doesn't reply but fishes a small notebook and a pen out of his pocket. "What did it look like?"

"I'm not too sure, but it was... it looked like a person, about this tall..." She motions with her hand. "...all black, a little short, a little fat..."

Zhao Yunlan frowns. "A little short and a little fat?"

Li Qian nods.

"Could it be that it wasn't short, but you just didn't see it stand up entirely before you ran away?"

Li Qian pauses for a moment, then drops her head. "May... maybe."

Zhao Yunlan looks at her strangely. "And then?"

"Then I ran away."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't say anything, just scrutinises her.

Li Qian is clutching her fists; her fingers are turning white.

After a moment, Zhao Yunlan lets it go. He tears off a piece of paper, writes a string of numbers on it, and says, "If there's anything else, please call me at once. My phone is on twenty-four seven. Thank you for your time."

He stuffs the paper into Li Qian's hand and stands up.

Shen Wei says, "I'll walk you out."

"No, no, no need," Zhao Yunlan replies. "I'll go outside for a smoke; you stay behind to chat with her a bit; I'm a bit worried that I scared her; sorry about that."

Shen Wei looks at Li Qian, who doesn't seem to know what to think and isn't reacting to Zhao Yunlan's words.



After Zhao Yunlan has left, cigarette in mouth, Shen Wei asks her as gently as possible, "Are you hungry? I'll go to the cafeteria to get you something to eat."

Now that Zhao Yunlan is gone, Li Qian relaxes a little, and with that all strength goes out of her. She shakes her head feebly.

Shen Wei says, "I'll call the doctor in to look after you; you have a good rest here before you head back, okay?"

Li Qian nods.

Shen Wei goes to the door, stops and turns around, "Do you have enough cash? I could give you some."

Li Qian gives him a forced smile. "Thank you, Professor, but that's really not necessary."

Shen Wei looks at her and sighs. Eventually he subtly reminds her, "Li Qian, some lies are intentional, some are not; the former are to deceive others, the latter are to deceive yourself... no matter which, it is very sad."

Li Qian is petrified.

Shen Wei drops his gaze. "Never mind, please take good care of yourself."

He makes a detour to the school pharmacy to pick up a bottle of medicine, then hurries towards the exit.

Zhao Yunlan hasn't quite made it outside yet; he's walking down the corridor, talking on the phone.

"I checked! This time it's not our problem, it's a problem from their side." The female voice on the phone isn't Wang Zheng, and her tone is rather mischievous. "Last night the Gates of the Underworld

opened, and a dozen souls went missing. Most of them are new ghosts less than a week old—they want to stay on earth and they don't know the rules. Fair enough, they can't cause much harm. The real problem is that they say a hungry ghost got away in the mix."

Zhao Yunlan thinks he heard her wrong, "A *what?*"

"A hungry ghost."

Zhao Yunlan is furious, and the voice on the other end is an old colleague so there's no need to dissemble; he looks around and sees nobody, but still lowers his voice. "What the fuck is all this shit? Which motherfucking Hell Guard wants to get fired?"

"The prisons aren't perfect. Besides, they're still using management from the last century down there. These hungry ghosts who've been imprisoned for a long time are the most desperate, and the prison guards are useless. If it were me, I could probably break out eight times a day." She pauses for a moment. "Oh right, since someone died, 'He' will be sending a letter, perhaps even visit us in person; so come back quickly, I don't dare open his letters."

Zhao Yunlan frowns. "Right, got it, I'm coming. Help me take care of something in the meantime: the small alley that faces the main University Road, there should be CCTV around. Help me find the footage, maybe they caught something. Then check on Li Qian, first-year postgrad in foreign languages at DCU. Also, while you're talking to 'downstairs', ask them for me whether they've heard of an ancient sundial with a Wheel of Reincarnation engraved on the back."

Zhao Yunlan glances around and sees Shen Wei catching up with him. "That's all, I have to go, call me if you find anything."

Zhao Yunlan hangs up, turns around, and in the blink of an eye erases his angry expression. He turns from old hooligan to innocent youth in a second, saying gently and politely, "Wait a moment, Professor Shen, if you'd be so kind."



# Chapter 10

Shen Wei hands him the bottle of medicine from the campus hospital. "You forgot your medicine." He looks at the wound on Zhao Yunlan's elbow and frowns. "Be careful with it; keep the wound dry and don't eat irritating foods, and..."

Zhao Yunlan stares at him in silence.

Shen Wei grows a little uncomfortable. "What?"

Zhao Yunlan changes tack and asks, "Are you married, Professor Shen?"

Startled, Shen Wei blurts out, "Why would I..."

"Oh. Do you have a girlfriend?" Zhao Yunlan continues. His gaze is intense; somehow Shen Wei feels that both 'yes' and 'no' are equally bad answers.

Zhao Yunlan uses the opportunity to take the bottle from him, turns it around a few times, and half-jokingly says, "Professor Shen, you're young and talented, and so thoughtful; you must be a catch."

"Don't talk nonsense." Shen Wei is a little ruffled.

Zhao Yunlan smiles, dimples deepening. "Right, can I borrow your phone for a second?"

Shen Wei takes out his phone, but Zhao Yunlan doesn't take it; he holds the back of Shen Wei's hand, enters his phone number and name in the contacts list, calls himself, and then hangs up.

"I'm leaving my contact details," Zhao Yunlan says, pretending to be professional. "If there's anything about the case, feel free to get in

touch."

He throws the bottle into the air and catches it, then waves at Shen Wei. "Thank you so much! I still have things to do, but once this case is over, I'll treat you to a meal, Professor Shen."

He saunters away unhurriedly, one hand in his trouser pocket. From behind, he looks careless and laid-back, but somehow he gives off a charismatic vibe; he's like a peacock displaying its plumage in a hormone-filled mating dance.

As he walks away, Shen Wei relaxes a little, gazing after Zhao Yunlan with a faraway but restrained look. Only when Zhao Yunlan can barely be made out any more does he turn around and walk in the other direction.

A few steps later, he can't help but turn around once again, but Zhao Yunlan is now completely out of sight.

In his contacts list is a new entry: a flirtatious 'Ah Lan' silently staring from the screen. He breathes the name and feels as though a knife is piercing the softest part of his heart, ripping and tearing it apart. He finally locks the sound away behind his lips.

When he raises his fingers, he can still smell a hint of Zhao Yunlan's cologne; he closes his eyes and takes a long and deep breath.

He doesn't know what scent Zhao Yunlan uses, but when he first smelled it, it was as if it had been calling to him day and night for many years.

On the tranquil campus, all one can hear is the sound of falling leaves. Shen Wei stands silently, expressionless. Only after quite some time, he smiles in self-deprecation, lowers his head and hurries away.

But the moment he looks down, his vague sorrow disappears and wears away, and his features sharpen, becoming quietly murderous.

~~~

Guo Changcheng is struggling with his background investigation, having no idea what kind of background to investigate. So he talks to people incoherently and is quite self-conscious of his efforts—even the big parrot in the flower and bird market can speak more smoothly than he.

It's almost noon when Zhao Yunlan finally calls. Guo Changcheng returns to the entrance with the strange talking cat, hanging his head in despair and waiting for the Chief to pick him up. He squats on the ground, but even his squat is different from normal people's; he's curled into a ball with hair covering most of his face, plus he's sitting next to a big fat cat. Passers-by give them odd looks.

Half an hour later, the arrival of Zhao Yunlan finally ends the humiliating spectacle.

Guo Changcheng's legs are numb from squatting and he limps along behind Zhao Yunlan on the quiet and beautiful campus path. From time to time he sneaks a glance at Zhao Yunlan's back, for all the world like a young wife who accidentally burned down the kitchen, worried and aggrieved.

In this half hour of waiting, Guo Changcheng has reflected deeply on the events that happened in his first twelve hours of working for the SIU. He feels extremely frustrated. Wasn't that just a gloomy little building? Wasn't the light just a bit weak and spooky? Didn't the Chief just casually say something that didn't make sense?

Why did he pass out?

Guo Changcheng never thought he would qualify for the high-salaried SIU with its fat bonuses, but now that he has gotten in due

to connections, he has to stick with it even if he's humiliated. Otherwise, how can he face his uncle?

He looks at Chief Zhao, who's carrying Da Qing on his shoulder. Although the cat is incredibly fat and the Chief has to crane his neck until his posture resembles that of a stroke victim, he still looks so handsome and cool.

Chief Zhao isn't that much older than Guo Changcheng, but he's always so sure, as if he isn't afraid of anything.

Zhao Yunlan turns around, and Guo Changcheng quickly looks away.

"What's up? You wanted to say something?" Zhao Yunlan, who's been cursing him behind his back, asks gently.

Guo Changcheng drops his head like a kid with autism, hiding half of his face behind his black fringe.

"Don't be shy," Zhao Yunlan says kindly. "If you want to say something just say it; we all have to communicate with each other for work. You'll learn eventually, I'm not bad-tempered, and even if I do get mad, it never lasts for longer than a day."

Da Qing listens quietly and hides his head behind his paws; even after thousands of years of cat life, he still cannot understand human hypocrisy.

"I... I... I..." Guo Changcheng stutters for a long while, and finally says on the verge of tears, "I think I'm so useless!"

Haha, did anyone say you aren't? Zhao Yunlan thinks happily.

However, he keeps up the two-faced act and pats him on the head affectionately. "Come on, young man, it's your first time out in the

field after all. Nobody is perfect, am I right? You'll get there slowly, I'm sure... so tell me, what did you learn from the teachers?"

"Ah... Oh!" Guo Changcheng hurriedly takes out a notebook, "The victim is called... she's called Lu Ruomei, postgrad in maths; she's a local and her family is quite well off. The Faculty of Mathematics doesn't have a lot of girls, so people take care of her, and she's quite popular; I didn't hear anything about her getting into trouble or having enemies. She was applying for a research opportunity, but she spent a lot of time on extra-curricular activities, so her grades were dropping..."

He babbles on with this kind of nonsense, and it's hard for Zhao Yunlan to listen patiently all the way. Finally he asks him. "Is there anything else? What is your opinion?" Zhao Yunlan is surprisingly patient.

"I think some of the other students competing for a research opportunity might have a motive, or she may have provoked someone during her off-campus social activities. We could investigate her relationships with other students..." Guo Changcheng glances at Zhao Yunlan insecurely. "I... that's all I can think of."

"Oh." Zhao Yunlan doesn't confirm or deny, just nods slowly. He stands still with his hands behind his back, and leaning down just a little. "So how do you think she died?"

Guo Changcheng can't figure out what he means, so he says stupidly, "She was... murdered?"

Zhao Yunlan can't help but burst into an annoyed laugh.

Unfortunately comrade Guo Changcheng is oblivious to any kind of subtle emotion or expression, so as soon as he sees the Chief laughing, he's relieved and eagerly tries a goofy giggle.

Chief Zhao has never dealt with such an oddball before; so he controls his anger and, with an inscrutable face, finds something leader-like to say. "You're doing well, you're very attentive; you have a lot of potential."

Guo Changcheng jerks his head up. The man in front of him looks down with a gentle smile; he's so good-looking, Guo Changcheng can't find ways to describe it, and the words fill him with warmth and strength. He finds himself blushing. The Chief really is too good to him; suddenly he understands the saying 'dying for the one who knows you'. He suddenly feels that Chief Zhao, who cares for him and appreciates him, is someone worth dying for.

Therefore, Guo Changcheng takes the initiative and volunteers for a most difficult job, more difficult than death: talking to strangers. "Then... then I'll go investigate her relationships at school!"

"What's the hurry? Zhu Hong is still in the office, I'll give her a call and she can handle that," Zhao Yunlan says carelessly. "How about this? I'll give you another important mission: you remember the girl who almost jumped off the building? She's a key witness in this case, and I want you to follow her; I think she lied to me, go and figure out what she's up to."

Guo Changcheng stands upright and his eyes sparkle. "Yes, sir!"

Zhao Yunlan nods. "Right, go."

Guo Changcheng rushes away, his blood still boiling hot and his chest stuck out as if rather than investigating, he's trying to stop a bullet.

As soon as he's gone, the benevolent Chief makes a foul face. "Fuck me," he says to the cat on his shoulder, "I've never seen an absolute idiot like this one. Motherfucking impressive!"

Da Qing looks up at him with his big round face. "You're really mean and hypocritical, Chief."

"You're a cat, don't give me that dog crap; you're the hypocrite here! Go follow him, I need to look for a thing back at the station. Don't let him die, otherwise what am I going to tell his uncle?" He pats the cat on the butt, and Da Qing meows lazily, bounces off of Zhao Yunlan, and trundles away.

Chapter 11

Shen Wei is on his way back from the cafeteria when he sees a scared Guo Changcheng standing at the entrance, poking his head in and not daring to enter. The fine black cat is squatting beside him, licking its shiny fur.

"Aren't you..." Shen Wei pauses for a moment, embarrassed. He realises he was too fixated on someone else earlier. "Excuse me, what's your name?"

Guo Changcheng startles, but quickly recovers when he recognises Professor Shen.

Guo Changcheng is much less nervous when faced with Shen Wei. The Professor doesn't give off the same vibes as Zhao Yunlan... he's more amiable, though he also carries an air of deeply ingrained restraint.

This is probably the charm of such well-educated gentlemen: whether he's dealing with a big figure like Zhao Yunlan or a small potato like him, he's always calm and reserved.

"I'm Guo Changcheng."

"Oh, young Officer Guo." Shen Wei smiles. "What brings you here?"

Guo Changcheng hesitates, he isn't sure whether he can talk about his mission to someone else; he looks to Da Qing for a sign, but the black cat looks inscrutable.

Da Qing face-paws; does the boy want a cat to teach him how to talk to another human being? The brave and wise Chief's conclusion really wasn't far off the truth; this intern is indeed a weirdo.

Fortunately, Shen Wei is tactful. Noticing Guo Changcheng's embarrassment, he changes his tone. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked; this is none of my business."

Guo Changcheng hangs his head in shame... although he doesn't quite know why he feels that way.

"Have you eaten? I bought quite a lot of food, you can have some if you want."

Guo Changcheng is about to refuse, but his stomach disagrees: he hasn't eaten since he came to the SIU.

As he's torn between decisions, Shen Wei calls out to Da Qing. "Come, kitty, I got you some milk. The doctor on duty is probably at dinner, so we'll just be quiet and remain unnoticed."

Seeing that his mainstay Da Qing has already succumbed to the temptation of food, Guo Changcheng has no choice but to follow suit in confusion.

Shen Wei tries to get Guo Changcheng to open up and relax. "You are quite young, Officer Guo, around the same age as my students. I take it you haven't been working very long?"

Guo Changcheng replies honestly, "It's my second day at work..."

Shen Wei smiles. "How does it feel to enter society?"

Terrible... but Guo Changcheng says with discretion, "It's all right."

Shen Wei walks along the corridor of the school hospital alongside both man and cat; his eyes twinkle behind his glasses, and he continues naturally, "Your colleagues and... the Chief, are they nice to you?"

"Chief Zhao is quite nice to me; oh, you've met him earlier today. As for my colleagues..." Guo Changcheng grimaces a little as he's reminded of paper-faced Lao Wu and the un-beheaded ghost Wang Zheng, but he finally says, "They... they're not bad either."

"Chief Zhao..." Shen Wei echoes. "Is Chief Zhao busy all the time?"

Guo Changcheng scratches his head. "I... I guess? I'm new, so I'm not sure."

"What do you think about him?"

"He's quite nice."

Shen Wei looks at him. "Then why do you seem afraid of him?"

Guo Changcheng is startled. "Well... he's the Chief after all..."

Shen Wei chuckles; he knows he won't get anything about Zhao Yunlan from Guo Changcheng, so he stops torturing him. Together they reach Li Qian's room.

Shen Wei seems to be quite used to taking care of others. He swiftly sets up the food and the utensils, heats up the milk in the microwave, takes the top off the disposable lunch box and turns it over to pour warm milk into it. He pushes it towards Da Qing. "Come on, let's eat."

Guo Changcheng is famished but his appetite is still not strong. He never ate in the school cafeteria, not because the food was bad but because he feels uncomfortable eating around strangers; and now he's in a ward with two strangers at the same time.

Li Qian is even less interested in her meal. She seems very troubled and disoriented, and if the doctor hadn't said she was fine, Shen Wei would think she's on drugs.

Professor Shen realises that when he stops talking, the only sound in the room is Da Qing licking the milk, so he asks Li Qian, "Do you live locally or far away? If it's not far away, you should go home and rest for a few days. I can talk to your tutors."

Li Qian pauses and puts down her chopsticks, then says softly, "At home... my family is having a funeral. Many relatives have come, so there's no room for me."

Shen Wei freezes.

Li Qian picks up her chopsticks and pokes at the rice. "My grandma... passed away two days ago."

"I'm sorry," Shen Wei says at once. "I shouldn't have asked. My condolences."

Li Qian looks down and doesn't answer; she stuffs dry rice into her mouth.

Shen Wei takes a pair of extra chopsticks and puts some food in her bowl. "I don't know what you like to eat, so I bought different kinds of food; try to eat at least a little."

Guo Changcheng, who's been keeping his head low, suddenly says, "My grandma always took care of me when I was small, but she passed away when I was sixteen, and I quit school for half a year."

Shen Wei and Li Qian look at him.

He stays silent for a moment, then says with a melancholy voice, "When I was a kid, I was always bullied at school. I didn't dare hit back, and I didn't even dare cry. When grandma came to pick me up after school and found out, she'd tell me off for being so timid during the whole walk home... and then she'd take me to buy yogurt, chocolate, sweets, and the good vegetable buns. She'd give all the food to me, she wouldn't even eat it herself... I thought, when I grow

up I'll make money and I'll buy her stuff she likes to eat, but... I never got the chance."

Li Qian is touched, and there are tears in her eyes. Guo Changcheng continues as if talking to himself. "She passed away in her sleep, and nobody even noticed at first... I always dreamed of her, from high school through to college, and she was always there to support me."

Guo Changcheng is desolate like a withering plant; Shen Wei pats him on the head to comfort him.

Guo Changcheng smiles shyly, but the smile quickly wears away. "When I graduated last September, I saw her one last time in a dream, and she said to me, 'You're all grown up now, I'm relieved, so I'm leaving'. I asked her where she was going, and she just shook her head, and then I never dreamed of her again. My uncle said she must have reincarnated."

Tears run silently down Li Qian's cheeks.

"What I mean is..." Guo Changcheng clumsily scratches his head; he's rather surprised that he managed to speak in full sentences for more than a minute. "Hey, please don't cry! When my grandma was gone, I was devastated as well. I felt I could no longer be filial towards her in the future, so why study and work hard? I was even willing to trade my life for hers, but... uh, I really shouldn't have said anything; what I mean is, don't be sad, our deceased relatives are all watching us."

He really shouldn't have said anything; Li Qian begins trembling and crying louder and louder, uncontrollably, until her limbs are quivering and her face goes blank.

Shen Wei rushes for the doctor; Guo Changcheng has never seen anyone so upset before, and helplessly stands beside her.

The school doctor doesn't have experience prescribing sedatives, so he suggests sending Li Qian to another hospital.

Guo Changcheng follows Shen Wei to take Li Qian out of the school hospital. Sitting in Shen Wei's car, holding a fragile, strange girl, he looks out at Dragon City University disappearing behind him and feels more and more that this thing called 'work' is really awful.

Shen Wei isn't Li Qian's tutor, nor her counsellor. He only teaches a few elective courses; but he benevolently takes on the responsibility. Guo Changcheng has never seen such a kindhearted professor before.

Shen Wei deals with registration and advance payment until Li Qian is in the emergency room; then he contacts his colleagues at the University to ask about her situation and family contacts.

Although Shen Wei's tone remains relentlessly courteous, Guo Changcheng can tell something's wrong. In his call to Li Qian's father, Shen Wei stops abruptly halfway through a sentence, as if interrupted by the other. A few moments later, he puts the phone down helplessly, pinches the bridge of his nose, and makes another call.

This happens a few calls in a row.

From Guo Changcheng's outsider perspective, it feels that Shen Wei doesn't seem to be informing people of Li Qian's condition, but rather has to plead with each of them. In the end, it turns out that of Li Qian's parents, uncles and aunts, none will come to see her.

Even Guo Changcheng is getting angry at this ordeal, cursing at them silently.

Out of options, Shen Wei hangs up the phone, crosses his arms and frowns.

With his broad shoulders, narrow waist, long legs, his tight, long-sleeved shirt and framed glasses on the bridge of his nose, he looks almost like a model from a perfume commercial. He stands there wordlessly. Guo Changcheng thinks he must want to swear, but Shen Wei says nothing.

A moment later, Shen Wei is still visibly worried, but he smiles at Guo Changcheng. "I'm sorry for troubling you today, young Officer Guo. Why don't you go back now and I'll take care of this student by myself. I don't want to get in the way of your work."

"I... I don't have work at the moment," Guo Changcheng mutters, staring at Da Qing's green eyes. "Chief Zhao told me to follow her, but didn't tell me what to do, or when I should go back..."

Guo Changcheng begins to realise something about this mysterious mission; he's incompetent, but he's not actually stupid. Following a strange sick girl around isn't some challenging mission, the Chief just wanted to get him out of the way.

Of course, he has no ability and only adds to people's mess. He only got into the SIU because of his uncle. It's been less than twenty-four hours and already so much has gone wrong; why would the Chief want someone so useless around?

"Your Chief Zhao doesn't think like that," Shen Wei says helplessly, though he's certain that Zhao Yunlan absolutely thinks like that. "Don't think too much about this."

Guo Changcheng folds in on himself, depressed.

After a while, the doctor comes out and tells them that Li Qian is grieving, and that she has been suffering from long-term depression. She's also malnourished and has low blood pressure, so her reaction was extreme. He has given her a sedative and recommends she be kept in the hospital for observation.

Shen Wei completes the inpatient procedure for her, and the two-men-and-a-cat combo stays at Li Qian's bedside until sunset; still not a single one of her family members has shown up.

Guo Changcheng softly asks, "Professor Shen, are none of her family members coming?"

Shen Wei doesn't know what to say and only sighs.

Guo Changcheng sits besides Li Qian on the edge of the bed, and he suddenly realises why she attempted suicide.

She has lost perhaps the only person who cared for her in the world... Now no-one supports or loves her anymore.

And so the night falls.

Chapter 12

"That part, rewind it."

After getting rid of Guo Changcheng, the first thing Zhao Yunlan has done is drive back to No. 4 Bright Avenue. He's gone straight into his office and started reviewing the surveillance footage in detail.

The office is a lot less busy during daytime; there's only one female officer working. She looks to be in her twenties, wearing light makeup, with her hair in a cleanly combed ponytail, revealing her beautiful face. Her eyes are drooping and visibly tired; even so, her hands are working very fast.

She wears a uniform top, but her legs are covered by a long and thick blanket. She sits very still, and if her cheeks weren't a healthy rosy colour, one would think she was recovering from a serious illness.

The blanket really is quite long, trailing along the floor. Zhao Yunlan accidentally steps on it and it slides to the side; a giant python tail wriggles out and quickly retreats beneath it. She doesn't even look away from the video, only pulls the blanket back up and keeps working.

The nameplate on her desk reads 'Zhu Hong'.

The footage is blurry; there seems to be some interference, maybe by a magnetic field. There's not much to be seen: after all, the crime scene is located in a small alley next to a side entrance to the university grounds, and the camera is installed at the big intersection of University Road. Only a short section of the alley where Luo Ruomei and Li Qian met is even in the frame.

The time on the video is 10:20pm. True to her statement, Li Qian is seen approaching from the direction of the university and entering a small supermarket across the street. After five minutes, she exits the supermarket again. She passes by Lu Ruomei and greets her.

The video is paused at the moment when Lu Ruomei crosses the street and is about to enter the small alley. Li Qian is glancing at her, and due to the bad quality of the recording her expression is not very clear. But then she stumbles backwards in obvious shock.

Zhu Hong stares at the screen for a moment; her drooping eyes widen to reveal vertical pupils. The snake eyes on a human face look very strange.

"Is she looking at something under the street light?"

Zhao Yunlan nods. "Can we take a closer look at that light?"

Zhu Hong tries to zoom in on the image, but it doesn't get any clearer. "Sorry, that's all I can do."

"I'll send you on a staff development course for a couple of days, you've gotta improve your technological skills."

Zhu Hong slaps her 'thigh'. "That's gonna take at least two years. I get like this for three days every month; how would I explain taking leave so often?"

Zhao Yunlan says shamelessly, "Can't you just say you have menstrual cramps? Stupid woman."

After a moment, Zhu Hong says, "You always destroy my beautiful fantasies about you, Chief."

"If you know I'm your Chief then you'd better not be fantasising."
Zhao Yunlan smacks her head lightly. "Or don't you want your bonus?"

Zhu Hong's pupils contract even further, and she licks her lips with a long forked tongue. "If you sleep with me, I'll even give up my salary and work for you for free."

Zhao Yunlan looks down and says with an insincere smile, "Really?"

Zhu Hong stares at him.

She suddenly realises that there's a good possibility her shameless Chief would actually agree to something like that.

"Flirting with your boss at work," Zhao Yunlan laughs. "You're really something, comrade Zhu Hong; I think you should take some of the citizenship training sessions the department offers, they might improve your thinking."

Zhu Hong wishes she'd kept her mouth shut, and quickly changes the subject. "If the CCTV didn't get it, it probably didn't want to be seen; unless the girl has the Third Eye, she probably only saw it because she touched the sundial."

Zhao Yunlan taps his fingers lightly on the desk. "I know about the Wheel of Reincarnation; it's attached to a sundial and engraved with philosophical quotes; I thought it was symbolic and didn't have much practical use. What's special about it?"

"When you mentioned an ancient sundial this afternoon, I thought of it instantly." Zhu Hong opens the drawer under her desk and takes out an old-fashioned wire-bound ledger. "I borrowed this from the Underworld, you can have a closer look yourself. It says that the back of the sundial is made from shattered pieces of the Three-Life Stone²⁶, and the scales on the back are from a fish in the River of Forgetfulness three feet and three inches long²⁷, with ventral fins as hard as crystal that all point in the same direction."

Zhao Yunlan nods, signalling her to continue.

Zhu Hong opens the ledger. "They say when Pangu created the universe and separated yin and yang, the Road to the Underworld and the River of Forgetfulness were the only boundaries between the two realms. Afterwards, life flourished and increased in numbers, so the Gates to the Underworld were created to better manage life and death. Long before the Gates existed, the Four Mystical Artefacts were created, but are now lost in different parts of the world. The Sundial of Reincarnation is one of them."

Zhu Hong's long fingers flip through the pages and stop at 'Sundial of Reincarnation', where there's something else written in small handwritten letters: 'life-span transfer'.

"Life-span transfer?" Zhao Yunlan frowns, and thinks of the weird new ghost that was following Li Qian around. "What about Li Qian? I asked you to check: does she know anyone who died less than a week ago?"

"Yes; her grandmother died at the end of August."

Zhao Yunlan leans backwards and lazily lights a cigarette. "That must be why the old lady was appearing in broad daylight; she had borrowed life energy from the Three-Life Stone. I knew Li Qian was lying. She used the Sundial to extend her grandmother's life; thanks to her..."

"The Sundial of Reincarnation stands for the course of the sun: rising in the morning, setting in the evening. And the fins of the black fish in the River of Forgetfulness all grow in the same direction. Only the older can transfer their life to the younger, I've never heard of it being the other way round... Chief Zhao, have you?"

Suddenly, a piece of rice paper appears in the air in front of her. She reaches out, and the paper gently floats into her palm. It has Li

Qian's name and horoscope readings on it. Under that, there are two rows of scrawled, barely decipherable handwriting.

Zhu Hong says, "I had the Underworld check her out. It says here that Li Qian's destined time of death was altered; her life was shortened, not lengthened."

Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrows.

"Sundial, Sundial, turn around, three times around the Stone, half my life and half of yours, born apart we'll die as one," Zhu Hong recites. "What that means is, if you have the Sundial of Reincarnation, you can use half your remaining life-span to raise someone back from the dead, and afterwards you and that person will die together when the time comes. Two years ago, Li Qian's grandmother should have died, so she used half her life to bring her grandma back."

Zhao Yunlan listens silently.

"I checked her background when you didn't come back. Although Li Qian was born in the city, she didn't grow up here. I called the administration of the village where she was registered, and they told me that she used to live with her grandmother who raised her ever since she was little. I guess her parents were working a lot and didn't have time for her. She also had a younger brother. Since at that time the one-child policy was very strict, having a second child meant... you know?"

Zhao Yunlan nods, and Zhu Hong continues, "Two years ago, her grandmother had a stroke. The doctors thought her a terminal case, but she recovered miraculously. Afterwards, though, she was still in poor health and diagnosed with Alzheimer's, maybe because of nerve damage caused by the stroke; she forgot more and more, and her condition worsened, but nobody realised that she had dementia. Only when Li Qian got admitted to university six months ago, her parents finally had no choice but to take them back in."

"So Li Qian exchanged life for her grandmother when she had the stroke." Zhao Yunlan flicks away some ashes. She was living in her mother's old home at the time, and happened to find an old heirloom. That makes sense. But I don't see what's so hard to say about this. Why lie to me?"

"Maybe there's a catch." Zhu Hong turns her chair around, leans her elbow on the back and fixes Zhao Yunlan with a gaze. Her normally frightening, cold reptilian eyes look unusually gentle. "Think about it; if there's a person you love enough to sacrifice half your life for them, but somehow you lose them again while they're right there, how would you feel?"

Zhao Yunlan frowns blandly, and hesitates. He's unmoved by this tragic story and only thinking long and hard until he can find something suspicious. Zhu Hong wonders who of them is the cold-blooded animal and sighs.

Zhao Yunlan shrugs. "All right, snake lady, tell me what you think."

"Li Qian always buys things online, mostly healthcare products for the elderly. She doesn't have a lot of money, mostly income from tutoring and running errands for lecturers. Other young girls want to beautify themselves and show off their looks, but she rarely buys anything for herself. So I think she's a great kid. If it's not directly related to the case, you don't absolutely have to know, do you?"

"The things she buys online can't prove anything; sometimes when you don't love someone anymore you'll use money to compensate..."

He trails off in the face of Zhu Hong's accusing stare that silently says 'how heartless and cold-blooded you are'.

"All right, fine," Zhao Yunlan says, "let's say you're right, she exchanged half her life for her grandmother. Why, then, is she still alive now her grandmother's dead?"

"That could be an accident; maybe the old lady died before her time was up. Lin Jing sent me a list of missing souls; I checked, and the grandmother isn't on the list. She's still hanging around up here; it's likely the Underworld doesn't know about her yet. Her soul is linked to the living by the Sundial, so the Underworld guards never noticed her."

Zhao Yunlan pauses in thought. "Hmmm..."

Zhu Hong asks, "What?"

"I suddenly thought of something. Li Qian and Lu Ruomei look quite similar; they have similar figures and hairstyles. From behind, a stranger would find it hard to tell them apart, and they were wearing the same T-shirt that day. And Lu Ruomei happened to die just after running into Li Qian... Think about it: Li Qian used the Sundial, so her body had to be tainted with the smell of the Mystical Artefact from the Underworld; if that really made her invisible to the Underworld guards, then the escaped prisoner..."

"You're saying the hungry ghost's target was supposed to be Li Qian!?"

Chapter 13

Zhao Yunlan puts out the cigarette and quickly fishes out his phone. "It's almost dark outside, and I only sent the idiot after her. That won't do, I've gotta go take a look myself."

Zhu Hong asks, "You mean the trainee who passed out?"

Zhao Yunlan looks at her grumpily. "Give me the letter from the Ghost Slayer."

Zhu Hong points her chin at the corner of the desk but doesn't dare touch it.

It's a black envelope with red words written in cinnabar powder: 'From a lone spirit to the esteemed Guardian. Please open personally.'

When Zhao Yunlan opens it, Zhu Hong hurriedly moves aside in fear.

After some polite platitudes, the letter inside summarises the escape of the hungry ghost, and finally, it reads, "I shall come at the midnight hour²⁸; my apologies in advance for troubling you."

The whole thing is written in neat and tidy 'Slender Gold' calligraphy; it can almost be said to have artistic value.

The Ghost Slayer is a god but not a god, a ghost but not a ghost, and calling him an immortal ghost also wouldn't be correct. Legend says that he was born in the depths of the Underworld, and he has a mighty blade that knows good from evil, loyalty from treachery. It can slay anything, which earned him his name.

From the highest heavens to the deepest levels of the Underworld, nobody in heaven and earth, whether human or god, spirit or ghost, can survive this weapon.

Because of this, everyone is terrified of him; Zhao Yunlan is the sole, foolishly thick-skinned exception. Not only does he fail to be appalled by the ghost slaying, he seems to think that the Ghost Slayer is a rather nice, kind person. The only bad thing about him is the way he talks: too old-fashioned and too long-winded.

Seeing that Zhu Hong is uncomfortable, Zhao Yunlan quickly glances through the letter, puts it in his pocket, and tells her, "You can go now; leave the night work for Wang Zheng. Since you don't have legs right now, you'll slide right off the seat whenever I hit the brakes - you'd better go somewhere where you're not in the way, best not leave the house at all. Take a good rest— oh, and call Lin Jing for me before you leave; tell him to come back if there's nothing special Downstairs."

Zhu Hong nods, relieved that she can leave before the Ghost Slayer arrives. "I'll be going then."

Zhao Yunlan rushes outside to call Guo Changcheng. When Guo Changcheng realises the Chief is calling, he can't help but stand at attention.

"What took you so long to pick up?" Zhao Yunlan is worried. "Is everything okay?"

Guo Changcheng stutters... oddly enough, though he got used to speaking with Zhao Yunlan in person, mild-mannered as he was in the morning, now his guts twist as his voice comes out of the phone.

Is it because the Chief sounds colder over the phone?

Guo Changcheng begins breathing heavily, making Zhao Yunlan wonder if this call will scare him into a heart attack. When Guo

Changcheng continues to struggle without getting out a single word, Zhao Yunlan sighs. "Is anyone else there? If so, put them on, and if not, hand the phone to Da Qing."

Relieved, Guo Changcheng hands the phone to Professor Shen.

Fortunately, Professor Shen is the reliable type: he efficiently summarises what happened to Li Qian and how they got her to the hospital, then asks, "What's wrong, is Li Qian still..."

The phone makes a loud but indiscernible noise. "Hello?" Shen Wei says. Zhao Yunlan seems to be saying something, but the signal is unstable; Shen Wei walks towards the window, ostensibly to get a better signal. But with Guo Changcheng distracted, he also opens the curtain and looks outside, "Hello? What did you say? Can you still hear me?"

Zhao Yunlan's voice finally becomes clear. "Damn it, get out of there, now!!"

A black shadow flashes in front of Shen Wei's dark eyes, making him blink. All lights go out; the window next to Shen Wei shatters, the cat screeches and jumps. A gust of wind hits Shen Wei, carrying a foul odour of blood and decay.

In the darkness, nobody sees Shen Wei extend a hand and grab up into thin air. When he opens his hand again, there's a blood red worm in his palm, writhing in fear. Expressionless, he crushes it; then he takes a deep breath and carefully reins in his fury.

Zhao Yunlan on the other end seems to be saying something, but the interference is too strong and nothing can be made out. The place is in utter chaos, the cat is screeching and things are falling over, and someone knocks down a steel chair. Shen Wei stumbles backwards and the phone connection dies for lack of a signal.

He turns the flashlight on the phone to maximum and shines it ahead of him.

An unfamiliar male voice shouts, "Watch out!"

It's Da Qing, who just knocked down the chair, which knocked the panicked Guo Changcheng on his ass as well.

Shen Wei grabs a mop from the corner of the room by its wooden handle and attacks; there's a crashing collision sound, and a black shadow rapidly flies over his head.

When he lowers his hands, the wooden handle is split in two. The shadow is darting towards Li Qian at lightning speed.

The sedated Li Qian is lying unconscious on the bed.

Their eyes are getting used to the darkness by now, and in the light of Shen Wei's phone, they can see a dark shadow... its mouth is open more than ninety degrees, so that its head looks like a sliced watermelon.

This time Guo Changcheng doesn't have time to faint: he's so dumbfounded, his heart rate doesn't even pick up. Like he's a bungee-jumping grasshopper, all his blood has rushed to his quivering extremities and his head feels like a balloon.

A voice screams in his head. *What is that thing? What on earth is it?!*

The black shadow takes the shape of a human, skinny and slender, like a skeleton, but with a frighteningly large belly. Its hands turn into scythes and viciously slash down towards Li Qian's stomach.

Guo Changcheng finally finds his voice again and starts screaming.

Shen Wei leaps forward, but someone else beats him to it, getting between Li Qian and the ghost.

It's an old lady, come out of nowhere, short and plump with a ridiculous wig on her head. She stretches her arms wide open and uses her body as a shield to protect the girl on the bed.

Shen Wei stops his instinctive forward motion at once; surprisingly nobody has noticed his abnormal action; then he grabs the steel chair and hurls it at the black shadow.

The chair hits its target full on, crashing into the shadow's 'body' and splitting it in half; the thing shrieks like an angry orang-utang, the two halves of its body now only connected by a small segment.

However, soon its body bubbles as if boiling, gurgling like a midnight nightmare monster; the two halves of the body sway violently and, as the mouth howls in a terrifying voice, they slowly merge back together.

"It's growing back! It's growing together!" Guo Changcheng shouts, not being of any help.

Shen Wei swoops in, picks up the steel chair once again, and starts battering at the monster.

Professor Shen is a gentleman, but his attacks are precise and vicious. While others are still gripped by fear and don't know what to do, he smashes the thing into several pieces. Not even out of breath, he tosses the chair aside.

For two seconds there is silence.

Then, Da Qing jumps onto the headboard of Li Qian's bed and says with trembling whiskers, "Don't just stand there, let's go! This is a hungry ghost, you can't kill it with a steel chair; you were just lucky there's plenty of yang energy in this room²⁹. If it really gets angry, we're screwed!"

Shen Wei stares at the black cat.

"Yes, yes," Da Qing says in a serious tone, "I'm talking, and you almost split a hungry ghost in half with a chair, let's not dwell on the weird stuff. Let's go!"

Shen Wei must have nerves of steel; before Da Qing is finished, he bends down as if waking from a dream and picks up Li Qian. In this emergency, he even speaks to the cat. "What about the old lady?"

The cat replies, "Don't worry about her, she'll follow. She's not a person, she's a new ghost."

"Oh." Shen Wei sounds like he's abandoned all ideas about physical reality. He says to Guo Changcheng, "Come now, Officer Guo, let's go!"

Guo Changcheng's mouth gapes in terror, and his neck is frozen in a bizarre position.

Shen Wei, carrying Li Qian on his back, raises his voice. "Officer Guo!!"

Guo Changcheng wakes up as if from a dream. He flails around on the floor like an octopus, until he finally manages to get his legs back under him, "I... I... I..."

"Enough! Come open the door for me!"

GuoChangcheng.exe has stopped working and he mindlessly follows orders, scrambling over to the door.

The corridor is pitch black, and the entire hospital is dead and empty like a ghost building; there's not a single nurse or doctor in sight.

The black cat runs ahead, incredibly agile for his size. Shen Wei follows with Li Qian on his back, Guo Changcheng stumbling along at the rear.

Their footsteps echo through the empty hallway. A chilling breeze tails them, and Guo Changcheng shivers.

He's sure there's something following them.

Chapter 14

But Guo Changcheng doesn't dare turn around; he grew up around older people who taught him a lot of superstitious beliefs, including this popular one: 'Don't turn around when you walk at night, otherwise ghosts will catch you'.

Although Guo Changcheng desperately tries to stay calm, he keeps thinking about what happened in the room. And he can't help but feel that the thing must be catching up to them. That vicious monster wouldn't care if you turned around or not, it has scythes for hands! Guo Changcheng feels his neck and is quite sure he wouldn't survive a single slash.

Guo Changcheng's rich imagination continues to haunt him: he thinks of photos of the young girl in the alley, her stomach sliced open and emptied... It's enough for months of nightmares.

Turn around... don't turn around... turn around... don't turn around...

To turn or not to turn his the dilemma torturing him, and soon his forehead is covered in cold sweat. He wipes it off and speeds up, catching up with Shen Wei who's still carrying Li Qian. His instinct is to throw himself at Shen Wei and shout for help.

Guo Changcheng has always been conflict-averse; just as a cat's instinct is to eat fish and a dog's to eat meat, his instinct is to run away. And right now, this instinct tells him that the safest place is between Da Qing and Professor Shen: he really doesn't want to be the hindmost taken by the devil.

Suddenly, Shen Wei stops; Li Qian starts moving, gradually regaining consciousness, and Shen Wei has to adjust his hold on her body a bit.

Oddly, Guo Changcheng doesn't keep moving forward to stand between Da Qing and the Professor, but instead stays behind the Professor. He turns sideways to check his surroundings. It's an almost protective position.

He suddenly remembers something. "I'm a police officer."

"I'm a police officer. I'm a police officer. I'm a police officer..." he repeats like a chant, as if it could make him braver. But the words aren't a magical spell after all; he's still frightened out of his wits. He feels his vision blurring as he chants, and as he raises his hand to his face, he encounters She Wei's stunned gaze.

Only then does Guo Changcheng realise that he's crying.

Professor Shen's consternation is understandable – he's an ordinary lecturer and he has really seen it all today: a murderous sentient shadow, a talking cat, and a cowardly crying cop!

Guo Changcheng himself doesn't even understand why he's crying, but he notices that it helps better than chanting to vent his emotions and reduce his fear. So he takes a deep breath, letting his tears flow freely, and bawls, "Run! I'll stay behind to protect you!"

Shen Wei only blinks at him wordlessly. He has seen enough insanity by now to be numb to it.

They start running again, and soon the cat reaches the stairs and points to the first floor. The group sprints up the stairs, Shen Wei lighting the way with Guo Changcheng's phone. The light flashes across something in a corner, and Guo Changcheng screams in terror.

Even though Guo Changcheng's brain is useless, his lung capacity is still quite good.

Shen Wei takes a closer look, and sees an infant by the wall... no, it's closer to a foetus, it's very small, even smaller than a newborn baby. Its head is damaged and the skull is exposed, its face is distorted and it has no teeth.

The creature looks like a medical specimen, propped against the wall, its hollow eyes staring up at the group.

"Stop screaming!" Da Qing says. "This is a hospital, it's full of yin energy, of course there'd be ghosts everywhere; are you a country bumpkin who's never seen the world? Stupid human."

Shen Wei asks dryly, "What is that?"

"An aborted foetus." Da Qing scratches at the infant, which lets out a mewl and vanishes. "Keep moving, the hungry ghost is catching up!"

Speak of the devil; the gang soon smells the foul, decaying odour again. As they run forward, heavy footsteps come thumping along behind them.

"What's that!?" Guo Changcheng screams, in tears. "Isn't the hungry ghost just a shadow? Why does this sound like something heavy?"

"I fucking said it! This is a hospital! There are all sorts of ghosts around!" Da Qing shouts. "And are you discriminating against heavy people? What's wrong with being heavy? Huh? Heavy doesn't hurt anyone does it? Heavy is good."

Shen Wei cannot imagine what kind of work environment Zhao Yunlan is used to, considering he has such peculiar colleagues.

Shen Wei doesn't seem tired at all although he's carrying a person on his back; like a teacher facing a problem child, he says calmly, "Cut the noise, you two; kitty, where's the exit?"

"Don't call me that, stupid human!"

"Godly cat," Shen Wei changes his tone without losing a beat, "we have been running in circles for quite some time now, do you have a brilliant plan?"

Da Qing stops abruptly, so Shen Wei nearly runs into him. He steps aside and only narrowly misses him. Guo Changcheng looks half dead as he leans against the wall, crying and gasping.

Da Qing pricks up his ears and looks around, his eyes glimmering in the dim light of the phone.

After a moment, he turns back to the group and says calmly. "I think we're in a ghost labyrinth."

The heavy stomping comes closer, from the front this time, and a blurred shadow is cast on the wall, something writhing within it. At a closer look, it turns out to be dozens of humanoid shadows struggling and twisting in a giant cluster, scratching and screaming and stomping on each other...

Every day, countless people die in a hospital. Their spirits wander around endlessly. They envy the living and they prey on life energy, but they can't get close. The living and the dead cannot co-exist.

That kind of resentment, that kind of despair...

"Run!!!" Da Qing thinks this is his phrase of the night. Give him a starting gun and he can almost host the Olympic Games.

Taking off at top speed, the three people and the cat scramble into a small storage room, Guo Changcheng desperately pulling the rusty door shut behind them. Tears are streaming down his face; he cannot believe he's still alive.

A freezing hand had reached for his neck just then and almost caught him, and he can still feel the lingering chill.

Shen Wei puts Li Qian down and helps Guo Changcheng move furniture to block the door.

Before they can even breathe a sigh of relief, something crashes against the door from the outside; Guo Changcheng falls on his butt in fear.

Again and again, the door rattles under the attack. Then it stops. The banging is soon replaced by the screech of fingernails scratching against the iron door.

Guo Changcheng, who was slumped against the door on the ground, jumps up as if electrified, his skin breaking out in goosebumps. Through his tears, he says to Shen Wei, "I haven't even gotten my first pay cheque, can I at least get my salary before I die?"

Shen Wei knows that laughing is inappropriate in this situation, but he really doesn't know what to do with Guo Changcheng.

Guo Changcheng sobs and asks, "Professor Shen, do you have any unfulfilled wishes?"

Shen Wei is unfazed, but he takes the time to consider the question anyway. He nods. "Yes. there's this person... We met by chance... I'm just a stranger to him. He doesn't know anything about me, nor is there anything between us," he says softly amidst the screeching fingernails, "but I want to see him again."

Chapter 15

The man is in his thirties, of medium build, wearing a pair of wide-rimmed glasses and a bracelet of sandalwood prayer beads. At first glance, he seems quite ordinary.

He gets out of the car and takes out his phone; he turns it to camera mode and points it at himself, with the hospital in the background. "September first, eleven twenty three, special mission at Dragon City Second Hospital, East Pagoda Road, Eastern District; Lin Jing, over."

A black SUV comes to a stop behind him, tires squealing. Zhao Yunlan jumps out and shouts, "Stop that nonsense and come with me, quick!"

Someone's about to die and you're taking a selfie video... Zhao Yunlan thinks furiously, how the fuck did his life come to this? His colleagues either aren't human or have severe brain damage.

The hospital is shrouded in dark mist, and there are no people around. The pedestrians hurrying past from East Pagoda road seem to be oblivious. Zhao Yunlan tries to call Shen Wei and Guo Changcheng twice in turn, but neither picks up; he swears, kicking the hospital door open with force.

A tendril of black fog shoots towards him. He swiftly dodges and draws a palm-length dagger from his trouser leg. He rolls on the floor, jumps to the side, and accurately slashes at the shadow, splitting it in two.

More shadows are coming at him from all directions now. Behind him, Lin Jing draws a gun; chanting mantras, he shoots down the creatures one after another, not missing a single one of them.

"Have you checked the horoscope readings of the trainee?" Zhao Yunlan faces the corridor stuffed with shadows like a hair-clogged sewer. "When he went to the school, he attracted resentful spirits; when he went to the hospital, he attracted the hungry ghost; if he were a character in a classic fantasy novel³⁰, he'd be the 'ghost magnet'."

Lin Jing chants, "That which is form is emptiness... I'll pray for him after this."

"That which, my ass! Speak English or shut your mouth!"

"That which is emptiness is form..." Lin Jing continues calmly.

"Motherfucker!"

Lin Jing pauses for a moment and advises, "Chief, you must not succumb to anger, and you must not succumb to desire."

This is the reason why he hates his job! Zhao Yunlan takes a deep breath and puts the dagger in his mouth; he brings out a yellow paper talisman and lights it with his lighter. The paper explodes into a storm of flames, engulfing all nearby spirits in a three feet tall fire spiral. The flames destroy everything in their path, and the endless crowds of ghosts vanish in the mystical flare.

"Amitabha, may Buddha have mercy on your soul."

Zhao Yunlan is pissed. "Enough of that."

Half a minute later, only embers and ashes remain.

Zhao Yunlan strides over and lights a cigarette with the dying flames. He signals Lin Jing to follow him and opens the door at the end of the corridor.

~~~



The group hiding in the storage room doesn't know that help is on its way. The screeching fingernails are increasingly vicious, and Guo Changcheng's breathing speeds up correspondingly. His nerves are close to snapping, and he's hovering on the edge of collapse.

Shen Wei ignores him, and asks the cat, "What do we do?"

Da Qing, a worldly-wise and experienced cat, replies calmly, "Don't worry; hang in there for a little longer. Chief Zhao got your message. Let's wait for him to save us."

"What? Is he alone? Is that safe? How can he get in?"

Da Qing wags his tail airily, not sure what the fuss is about. "Don't worry, a few small ghosts can't hurt him."

Shen Wei frowns and leans against the wall. "Can't we save ourselves?"

Da Qing glances at him and replies coldly, "We have a team that consists of a human, a piece of garbage, a vegetable, and me... a cute mascot. As for saving ourselves... if they ate us, we wouldn't even get stuck in their teeth."

"Didn't I just smash that thing to pieces with a chair?"

"That's because it was too hungry and let its guard down. You two young guys have strong yang energy, so it couldn't resist attacking despite being a little too weak to take you. Now we're surrounded by a whole horde of evil spirits, there's nothing we can do... oh, fuck, why is there another one?"

Shrill children's laughter comes from the corner of the room; Shen Wei looks down and sees a pale little girl kneeling on the floor, laughing eerily and playfully trying to grab the cat's tail. Before Shen

Wei can even make out whether she has fangs, Guo Changcheng jumps at him and clings to him like a koala to a tree.

"Help!" The young police officer, who had just vowed in tears that he would protect him, is clinging to Shen Wei, snotty-nosed and screaming at the top of his voice. "A ghost!! It's a ghost!!"

The child ghost is young and its brain hasn't fully developed. Now she's found a new way to entertain herself and abandons the cat at once, floating towards Guo Changcheng. She curiously looks him up and down. Guo Changcheng carefully squints down and sees her stick her tongue out and roll her eyes back, while her head spins three hundred and sixty degrees and almost detaches.

Guo Changcheng is so frightened he can't even pass out; he hangs on to Shen Wei as tightly as he can and continues screaming, "Ahhhhhhh!!! Ghost!!!"

Shen Wei stands in silence, upright like a soldier, holding on to his waistband so Guo Changcheng doesn't pull down his pants, while behind him the hungry ghost's nails scratch at the door, and the little girl is doing the head thing in front of him. In a certain, weird way, he finds it quite funny.

~~~

Only a few metres in, Zhao Yunlan's revealing watch starts to malfunction and rotate crazily; there are way too many evil things in here.

He yells, "Hey, fake monk, my watch is broken again! Use whatever tricks you have and be quick about it, there are people waiting for us to save their lives!"

Lin Jing smiles and sits cross-legged on the floor. He closes his eyes and holds the prayer beads in his hands, chanting mantras like an

old monk. Zhao Yunlan, long used to this, waits impatiently, leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest.

A moment later, Lin Jing opens his eyes, and shouts, "There!"

The prayer beads quiver and rattle, and Lin Jing stands up and points to a direction. "Over there."

Zhao Yunlan starts off in that direction and remarks, "That was fast this time?"

Lin Jing explains in his usual leisurely tone, "They're two young men, they have abundant yang energy. Even with Da Qing being a cat and emitting lots of yin energy, they're very easy to spot."

Zhao Yunlan pauses. "Two young men? Shouldn't there also be a girl?"

"The girl isn't with them."

Zhao Yunlan frowns; Guo Changcheng is the type to constantly piss his pants; hard to tell with him. But Da Qing, despite being a lazy freeloading cat, still has some morals. And then there's Professor Shen.

Offhand, he says, "That's impossible, Shen Wei would never abandon a student."

Zhao Yunlan has only met Shen Wei once, but he has a strong feeling that he's not that kind of person.

Lin Jing asks, "Who's this Shen Wei? Isn't the trainee called Guo?"

Zhao Yunlan can't be bothered to explain. "You don't need to know."

Lin Jing pauses for a moment, coming to a realisation. "The last time you tried to avoid a conversation like that you were falling for the

campus belle; so tell me, who's the beauty this time? Wait, is it a guy or a girl?"

Zhao Yunlan answers him, "Amitabha, that which is emptiness is form."

Lin Jing has nothing to say to that.

Zhao Yunlan lights the way into the eerie, narrow hallway with his lighter; the convoluted corridors intersect and diverge like a deadly spider lair.

Why isn't Li Qian with them? Was there a reason for them to abandon the girl? Or... do they just *think* that they're with her?

~~~

At this moment, in the corner of the storage room, 'Li Qian' opens her eyes.

# Chapter 16

Guo Changcheng hears some noise and looks back over his shoulder to find Li Qian standing up.

Her movements are incongruous, like a broken puppet controlled by an inexperienced puppeteer. But she's probably still suffering aftereffects of the sedatives, so Guo Changcheng doesn't think anything of it.

With great relief, he says, "Oh thank god, you're all right."

Li Qian stays silent and stares at him blankly.

Suddenly Guo Changcheng finds her rather strange. "Li Qian?"

He walks forward to take a closer look, but Shen Wei blocks his way.

Li Qian smiles eerily, her mouth curving up into an unnatural crescent. She makes a strange gurgling noise; her shoulders twist awkwardly, as if rusty, and her entire body sways.

Just when Guo Changcheng wonders if she's paralyzed, she pounces forward at lightning speed, opens her mouth and attacks Shen Wei's shoulder. In the dim light of the phone, her gaping mouth reveals teeth like the tusks of a monster, and her eyes are almost popping out.

Shen Wei moves back and dodges sideways, bumping into Guo Changcheng. Guo Changcheng, slow to react, acts on instinct and unwittingly fulfils his promise to 'protect' the other: his arms flail at Li Qian like those of a frantic octopus... his clumsy attacks consist of scratching and hair pulling, and he seems about to pounce on her to

bite her. In this scrappy fight, he hits her in the face by chance and steps on her twice in his panic.

Even though his actions are almost heroic, he continues to shriek tearfully in his usual feeble way, "Don't come here! Don't come here! Help!! Don't come closer!"

The situation cannot get any more chaotic: caught in the middle, Shen Wei pushes Guo Changcheng away with one hand and twists Li Qian's arm with the other.

Li Qian wriggles and twists like a crab in a cooking pot, clawing and biting violently. Shen Wei lets go of Guo Changcheng and clutches her neck from behind, pushes her to the wall, and traps her flailing hands.

The small storage room is in uproar – a hissing girl, a ghost child hugging the leg of a crying policeman, a swearing cat, and horrifying claws scratching at the door from outside.

Although Shen Wei is more composed than any human could ever be, he wonders at this point whether he's having a schizophrenic dream.

"Who can help me tie her up?" Shen Wei asks, but between all the crying and swearing, nobody pays him any attention. Forced to change tactics, he raises his voice. "Stop crying, young Officer Guo, that little one won't bite you. May I trouble you to come and help me for a bit?"

As if to challenge his words, the ghost child opens its almost toothless mouth and starts nibbling on Guo Changcheng's leg.

Guo Changcheng screeches like a dolphin, but the cat paws him across the head to shut him up. "Look properly, you idiot!"

Guo Changcheng feels like he's about to pass out from pain, but on this, he opens his eyes a fraction and looks down. The little ghost girl's teeth and hands are going straight through his body – she can't even touch him!

He blinks in amazement and the burning pain disappears instantly. Clearly his powerful imagination had simply made it up.

Li Qian is struggling more and more forcefully, and Shen Wei, stuck with two useless companions, breaks out in sweat. "Officer Guo!!"

Guo Changcheng scrambles over and takes off his belt. He has to clamp his legs together to keep his pants from falling down. It makes him look as if he's trying not to pee, but he helps Shen Wei to tie up the girl.

Suddenly, the spirit of the old lady reappears. She seems to have weakened quite a bit, and as she anxiously tries to touch Li Qian, her hand only goes through the girl's body. The more she tries, the weaker she gets.

Guo Changcheng reaches out to stop her. "Hey old lady..."

Unsurprisingly, his hand goes through her.

She turns around and looks at him. Her face is deeply lined, with large bags under her eyes. Her sparse white hair is held together in a bun wig, revealing an ugly, shrivelled scalp. Her brow wrinkles around her dull eyes so much that they're pressed down into small triangles.

She seems eager to say something but when she opens her mouth, no sound comes out. When she keeps reaching out in vain, unable to touch anything, her eagerness finally turns to despair.

Helplessly, she stares at Li Qian, silent tears rolling down her face. They're as dull as her eyes, like rainwater washed through mud.

Guo Changcheng stands there stupidly, looking at Professor Shen and Da Qing for help; he points at Li Qian and says, "What's... what's going on with her?"

Shen Wei lowers his head, uncertain, but Da Qing sighs. "Something evil is inside her; but there's got to be a reason<sup>31</sup>. If you can be fine yet she gets possessed, there must be something wrong with her."

Guo Changcheng can't tell if this is a compliment or an insult. But he doesn't get long to wonder, because suddenly – with a screeching sound – a hole is torn into the small iron door. A giant scythe-shaped claw, like that of a praying mantis, comes slashing in viciously.

Shen Wei nimbly dodges and pushes Li Qian to the side. The hungry ghost's claw grazes his scalp.

The hungry ghost, far bigger than before, tears the door the rest of the way open and pounces forward towards the living. Ghost grandma is still in the way, and it goes right through her body. Her horrified expression seems to remain even as her body disappears completely.

Da Qing screams, "Dodge!!"

Guo Changcheng instinctively sits on the floor. Da Qing jumps to a high spot, and his body begins bulking up to almost twice his size; his eyes turn gold. He gives off the impression of a small, growling panther with razor-sharp teeth.

But he doesn't make an ordinary noise: he blasts out a beam of supersonic sound waves, invisible energy bursting towards the hungry ghost rampaging through the storage room.

Guo Changcheng can't hear it, but he can feel the sheer power; it flashes in front of his face like knives, and he almost feels as if his nose is cut off.



The next second, the hungry ghost slams against the wall; in the dim light, Shen Wei thinks he can even see a crack forming.

The evil ghost is pinned to the wall like a decoration. Da Qing returns to normal size and stumbles forward, falling off the shelf like a zombie cat. Shen Wei catches him just in time. Da Qing glances at Shen Wei weakly before passing out in his arms.

For a moment Guo Changcheng fears he's dead; but when Shen Wei pets his fur and Da Qing's stomach rises and falls regularly under his palm, he realises Da Qing has only passed out from fatigue.

"What do we do?" Guo Changcheng asks, getting up from the floor.

Before anyone can say anything, an earth-shaking howl blasts through the room.

Guo Changcheng falls back down on his butt.

Startled, they turn to look at the wall. The hungry ghost that was flattened against the wall like a pancake just now is starting to bulk up again. Hordes of black shadows crowd in from the corridor; the hungry ghost absorbs them all and its gigantic stomach keeps expanding like a balloon. It detaches from the wall and lands on the floor on its skinny legs, swaying. Its mouth opens to nearly 180 degrees, so that its head looks like a watermelon chopped open. A terrible wind comes from the storage room.

Guo Changcheng feels himself slip forward uncontrollably; he's shocked to see that he's moving further away from Shen Wei and closer to the ghost by the second.

"I'm being sucked in!!!" Guo Changcheng screams, and despite his panic, he somehow finds a metaphor. "I'm being sucked in like jelly in a vacuum cleaner! I'm being eaten alive!!!" He flails around to grab

something to hold onto. "I... I'm a police officer! I'm being eaten alive!! I'm a police officer!"

He has completely forgotten that he initially used the phrase to inspire himself. But his brain must be malfunctioning anyway; there's no logical relationship between being a police officer and being eaten alive.

Perhaps even the hungry ghost finds his food too noisy; it opens its mouth again and roars. Guo Changcheng feels strangled by an invisible hand and no longer makes any sound. He struggles to shake his head, his hands scrabbling at his own neck, their veins already standing out. His throat makes an awful sound like a leaky old bellows.

Shen Wei grabs his hand and tries to pull him back; Guo Changcheng feels as if he's being torn in two.

Da Qing is still unconscious, Li Qian is flailing on the floor with dull eyes, and the giant hungry ghost is approaching slowly with a whole horde of smaller spirits.

The situation cannot get any worse.

But sometimes, when the night is darkest, the stars come out<sup>32</sup>.

Just then, a sharp whistle sounds out of nowhere, piercing everyone's eardrums.

The ghost child is terrified, screams a silent scream, and escapes down through the floor.

A black dagger slashes down between Guo Changcheng and the hungry ghost, as if cutting an invisible rope, and the ghost smashes against the wall. Guo Changcheng falls backwards onto Professor Shen, and the two stumble—

Guo Changcheng falls flat on the ground, but Shen Wei is caught by someone.

Zhao Yunlan wraps his arms around Shen Wei's waist and steps aside, the angles of his face thrown into relief by the glow of the lighter: handsome, cool, and sharply contoured like a well-crafted statue. His eyes sparkle in the sheer darkness like two flames.

Chief Zhao plays the role of saviour expertly. He lowers his voice like an untamed wolf, looking into the Professor's eyes like a hero saving a damsel in distress. "Professor Shen, are you all right?"

Nobody remembers the poor trainee wailing on the floor.

## Chapter 17

For a few seconds, Shen Wei seems lost in a trance – but no one could blame him; compared to Guo Changcheng, the mild-mannered Professor Shen is a textbook example of what it means to be calm and collected.

Finally, he lowers his eyes and pulls away from the hands groping him; he adjusts his glasses. "I'm fine, thank you."

Guo Changcheng has never been so pleased to see another human being in his life. Still on the floor, he cries, "Chief Zhao, help me!"

His miserable position is really quite comical. Zhao Yunlan quickly glances around the storage room to confirm that no-one is injured; in an attempt to lighten the mood, he pitches his voice high and intones jokingly, "What injustice dost thou bring to bear, hast thou got thyself an affidavit? Show me at once!"

Guo Changcheng falls face-down on the ground.

Shen Wei rubs his nose and hides his faint smile.

The hungry ghost revives yet again; Shen Wei looks up and sees its scythes slashing towards Zhao Yunlan.

"Behind you!"

Zhao Yunlan spins around and narrowly dodges the first scythe even as the second one comes slicing down. Lifting his dagger above his head with both hands, he fends off the blow, then grabs the ghost by its wrist. His movements are swift and powerful, with well-trained precision and sharpness.

He hasn't yet dropped his smile when he meets the hungry ghost's eyes, but it is chilly now.

Behind the hungry ghost, a deep male voice chants, "Namo Amitabha..."

A bell chimes from nowhere, a sound that travels along people's bones to their very souls. Guo Changcheng starts feeling dizzy and seeing stars, and the struggling Li Qian stops moving.

The hungry ghost screams in agony as if shot in the head; an endless stream of black shadows rushes from its body.

Zhao Yunlan lets go of it. It has now shrunk down to just the size of a normal human; scrawny with a big stomach, feeble and withering.

Zhao Yunlan leisurely takes out a glass bottle so small it fits into his palm. When he opens it, a cold stream of light shines through the bottleneck. The hungry ghost cowers and runs, but Lin Jing blocks the doorway and strikes a Diamond Mudra<sup>33</sup>; the force field bounces the ghost back into the room.

Zhao Yunlan points the open bottleneck at the hungry ghost.

The ghost looks like Munch's painting 'The Scream'; and with one last expression of horror, it's sucked into the bottle.

The translucent glass becomes opaque, and Zhao Yunlan closes the bottle with a cork stopper. He holds the mini prison against his ear and shakes it a few times, announcing cheerfully, "Mission accomplished."

Da Qing slowly awakens from his deep slumber and says morosely, "You guys were committing police brutality again, you made so much noise..."

Zhao Yunlan picks up the cat and stuffs him into his bag.

Da Qing moans feebly. "What took you so long?"

"Traffic jam on the second south-east ring road." Zhao Yunlan pats him on the head. "Go to sleep, you'll get your bonus this time."

Da Qing's eyelids droop and gradually close, as he mutters, "I... I wanna eat grilled yellow corvina..."

Guo Changcheng looks at him dumbly. "S-so... it's over?"

Zhao Yunlan frowns impatiently, but quickly puts on a smile; after all he doesn't want to spoil his friendly act. "There's one more thing."

He crosses over to Shen Wei and takes his elbow. "Are you really not injured? Sorry for dragging you into this; I'll have to take you for a check-up."

Completely unguarded, Shen Wei lets him take his hand. "Really..."

That's all. His face goes blank, and he passes out.

Zhao Yunlan gently catches Shen Wei, with one hand on his back and the other beneath his knees, and whispers into his ear, "A female student called Li Qian attempted to jump from a building today; you sent her to the hospital. But you yourself passed out due to low blood sugar, and stayed in the hospital for observation for a day."

Lin Jing points at Li Qian and winks at Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "Li Qian is involved in a murder case, and is brought in for questioning by the police; you don't remember anything else."

Shen Wei's glasses are askew and sliding down the bridge of his nose, revealing his slender eyebrows. His unconscious head is pillowed on Zhao Yunlan's shoulder.

Zhao Yunlan carries him outside.

Lin Jing picks up Li Qian and puts her over his shoulder; after two steps, he notices Guo Changcheng isn't following, so he asks politely, "Kind sir, I have another shoulder; would you like me to carry you as well?"

"No-no-no... no need, thanks."

Lin Jing bows, holding up one hand. "Amitabha, you're welcome." He calmly walks away.

Zhao Yunlan carefully avoids the duty nurse who appeared again at some point, and puts Shen Wei in Li Qian's room. He takes off his glasses, sets them aside, covers him with a blanket, and turns up the thermostat.

After some thought, Zhao Yunlan takes the Professor's right hand and draws an invisible soothing talisman on the back of it. Zhao Yunlan smirks and kisses his hand softly. "Good night, Sleeping Beauty."

"Let's go." He signals Lin Jing and Guo Changcheng. "An important guest will arrive at midnight; we shouldn't make him wait."

~~~

When their footsteps have disappeared from the hallway, Shen Wei opens his eyes and sits up. There's not a trace of sleep on his face.

He lifts his right hand and softly rubs the back of it; a golden talisman appears. Shen Wei looks at the symbol tenderly for a long time, an unconscious smile on his face. But eventually the smile wears away.

He frowns, as if worried and in pain.

Shen Wei lowers his voice and murmurs something; the golden talisman leaves his skin and solidifies into a small piece of paper, floating above his hand. He picks it up and keeps it safe like a cherished treasure.

He tidies the bed, jumps out of the second-floor window and disappears into the night.

~~~

When Zhao Yunlan and Co. return to No. 4 Bright Avenue, it's almost midnight and the nightshift is on duty. Lao Wu opens his gigantic mouth, and says, "Oh, Xiao Guo, you're back? How was your first mission?"

After being hunted by a hungry ghost all night, Guo Changcheng finds Lao Wu's paper face very approachable by comparison, so he puts on a feeble smile and says, tongue in cheek, "Good... pretty good..."

Lao Wu laughs, "It's okay, you're just starting out, you'll learn along the way; you're alive after all, you've got a future ahead of you!"

Guo Changcheng realises he has a workplace advantage: he's alive.

Zhao Yunlan makes Lin Jing and Guo Changcheng take Li Qian inside, parks the car, checks the time, and says quietly to Lao Wu, "You know about this case, right? We can't execute an escaped Underworld prisoner, only arrest him, so the Ghost Slayer will visit in a while; greet him politely."

Lao Wu shivers in terror, and lowers his voice. "His— his Honour is coming?"

Zhao Yunlan nods, pats Lao Wu on the shoulder, and lights a cigarette as he enters the office.



Lao Wu dares not read the newspaper in the security room like he usually does, and instead stands upright by the door like a royal guard.

Zhao Yunlan waves at Guo Changcheng and points to a new desk. "This is your desk. If there are no special cases, our working hours are nine to five, but you don't have to punch in and out, we work on the honour system. If you have to arrive late or leave early on occasion, just call me. Twelve to one is lunchtime. The canteen is on the second floor, meals are free for staff. Sick leave is paid, insurance and pension are being arranged for you. You have nothing to worry about."

Zhao Yunlan hands Guo Changcheng a credit card. "Password is six ones, change it yourself. Salary and bonuses are all transferred here, every 15th of every month, and your first salary has already been paid. If you need to claim travel expenses, find Wang Zheng. You fill out the form during the day and attach... ask someone else how to attach the receipts. Leave the form on Wang Zheng's desk, and she'll deal with it during her work hours, and the next day you get the money from her."

Guo Changcheng takes the card with both hands, and forgets all about Wang Zheng the terrifying un-beheaded ghost. He feels a burst of unspeakable pride. Salary... that means he finally has a job!

"I— I have a salary now!" he stammers, eyes lighting up.

A money-grubbing moron. What a legendary mix of characteristics. Zhao Yunlan gives him a bitter smile. "Your uncle is so rich, you must have plenty of money to spend, what are you so excited for?"

Guo Changcheng raises his head, looking serious. "I need it! I really need it!"

But he doesn't say what for; all he does is carefully place the card in his wallet like handling a one-of-a-kind antique.

Zhao Yunlan is about to say something, but then he sees a white gleam flash across Guo Changcheng's body. He's astonished: this kid has a powerful aura of virtue. Is it his ancestors protecting him, or is it good deeds from his past life? Or what is it...?

He puts out the cigarette and looks at Guo Changcheng with narrowed eyes, but the boy is unreachable in his happiness. Zhao Yunlan quietly points to the room with the sign 'Director's Office'. "I'm usually in there; if you need anything just knock."

Zhao Yunlan wipes a hand down his face; there are dark bags under his eyes and his eyelids are growing heavy. He slumps into his chair, resting his head in his arms on the desk. "I have to close my eyes for a bit. Wake me up when he comes."

Guo Changcheng doesn't know who 'he' is, but luckily Lin Jing is here, so the poor trainee knows he can safely take a nap for the first time in twenty four hours. His body has been on high alert this whole time, and he quickly gets drowsy sitting in the well air-conditioned office.

It seems barely any time later when Guo Changcheng startles awake; he suddenly feels an ominous chill.

# Chapter 18

The air condenses in a rush of eerie frost; the air conditioner turns off on its own as the temperature in the room plummets. White fractals crystallise on the window panes.

The ghost staff members on duty have all stopped their work; they stand still and lower their heads, waiting for the arrival of a most important figure.

Zhao Yunlan, awake again, is sitting upright. He's pouring hot tea into four cups arranged in front of him on the table; Lin Jing has stood up as well.

Guo Changcheng is puzzled, but follows suit.

The air conditioner beeps a few times and switches to heating mode.

Firm footsteps echo through the empty hallway, stopping at the door of the SIU. Lao Wu opens it, politely ushering someone in. He's extremely respectful, like a eunuch following behind an emperor; he leads the figure into the office, pulls out a chair, and keeps his eyes lowered as he says, "Your Honour, this way please."

The figure says politely, "Thank you."

It's a male voice, soft, pleasing and polite, but very solemn.

Guo Changcheng is still numb and sleepy; while everyone is frightened and keeping their eyes respectfully lowered, he alone musters up enough courage to look at the person.

His slender body is completely wrapped in a black cloak. His limbs are all covered and his face is obscured by a black mist.

He stands at the door, cupping his hands in traditional greeting, and addresses the Chief cordially. "Sorry to trouble you." The Chief nods politely as the dark figure slowly walks into the room.

Zhao Yunlan takes out a yellow paper talisman, lights it, and the ashes fall into a cup of hot tea and melt in the liquid. The hot liquid cools down instantly. At the same time, a cup of hot tea appears in the cloaked figure's hand.

"No trouble," Zhao Yunlan says. "It has been a cold journey, so please take a seat, Ghost Slayer, and have a drink of warm tea."

Looking at the Chief burning the talisman and sending the tea, Guo Changcheng can't help but think of burning offerings to the dead, and his brain fixates on it. It takes a while for Zhao Yunlan's words to register.

"A cold journey?" Guo Changcheng is bewildered: isn't it the middle of summer? Where does this person come from?

The trainee suddenly remembers something and shudders. When he was small, his grandma used to tell him that before someone dies, you must give them a hot meal and warm clothes, otherwise their soul might freeze on the way to the Underworld.

Could it be...

The Ghost Slayer takes a sip. "Good tea, thank you very much."

He walks past Guo Changcheng and sits opposite Zhao Yunlan; as he passes, Guo Changcheng catches a scent.

It's nothing like the decaying odour of the hungry ghost they encountered at the hospital; it's not unpleasant at all, a very faint, barely discernible smell. It reminds Guo Changcheng of winter in the Greater Khingan mountain range. It had been snowing all night and when he opened the door and went out in the morning, his first

breath of air carried the smell of the endless white snow, unchanged all year round. It was extremely clean and cold, mixed with the fragrance of some dying flowers. But after just a moment, the cold numbed his sense of smell, leaving him unable to distinguish anything more.

The Ghost Slayer speaks softly and gently, like a scholar in an ancient Chinese drama. If he were reprimanded or beaten, he might simply keep saying, "How absurd." There's nothing particularly frightening about him besides the sheer blackness, but as Guo Changcheng wakes up fully, he begins to feel terrified to his bones.

That terror is inexplicable and illogical.

Yet it comes from the soul.

Guo Changcheng now understands why the ghosts in the corridor are all terrified like mice meeting a cat.

"He comes from the Southern hemisphere, it's winter over there..." Guo Changcheng closes his eyes, no longer daring to look at the Ghost Slayer, and desperately tries to convince himself of a scientific explanation.

There are four humans and ghosts in the office altogether, not counting the unconscious black cat. Zhao Yunlan has poured four cups of tea, but neither Lin Jing nor Guo Changcheng dare to drink. The only person who isn't frightened is Zhao Yunlan. He calmly stays in his seat instead of rising to greet the Ghost Slayer. Everyone in the office admires his formidable sitting power.

He does stand up when the Ghost Slayer has finished his tea. "Come, I'll take you to the interrogation room."

The Ghost Slayer follows him silently, passing humans and ghosts who all keep quiet in fear. As if making small talk, he says, "You don't

look too well, Lord Guardian. It must be because this case of ours keeps you busy day and night. Please do take care of yourself."

Zhao Yunlan waves lazily. "I'm fine, I can survive a few all-nighters. If not, that'd be all right, too. I'm sure I could find some job or other in the Underworld to get by."

The Ghost Slayer disagrees. "Life and death are matters of great significance, Lord Guardian. Best not joke about them."

Zhao Yunlan laughs it off and opens the door to the interrogation room.

'Li Qian' has been screaming uncontrollably ever since she woke up, but the screaming stops abruptly as the Ghost Slayer enters.

When 'Li Qian' sees the Ghost Slayer, she quivers like a dying chicken, staring at him in horror. A moment later, her eyes roll back into her head and she falls unconscious.

Guo Changcheng, who has been following at the very back, suddenly feels something rushing at his face and stumbles backwards. The Ghost Slayer raises his arm, and his sleeve makes a powerful black wave gush outward. A ghostly figure flashes before them; it seems to be female, long-haired, and wearing a tattered dress. It's grimacing and writhing and wailing. The Ghost Slayer crushes it immediately, turning it into black smoke and absorbing it into his sleeves.

"Obdurate in sin, still vainly possessing others; the sentence is death," the Ghost Slayer says blandly, his tone remaining as gentle and courteous as before.

Guo Changcheng shivers.

Zhao Yunlan ignores him and makes a gesture of invitation. There are four chairs and a desk in the room. Li Qian is now pale and

unconscious, slumping in her restraints on the other side of the table.

Lin Jing pulls out a squirt bottle, approaches her without a trace of respect for her vulnerable position, and ruthlessly sprays water in her face. It takes her a while to wake up. Once she's awake, he says, with his best 'that which is form is emptiness' Buddhist monk face, "We're the police, we need to ask you some questions, be honest or bear the consequences."

Li Qian is puzzled, but she soon recognises Zhao Yunlan and Guo Changcheng. She wants to say something but realises she's tied to a chair. Shocked, she looks down at the rope. "What... what's going on?"

Compared to Lin Jing, Zhao Yunlan could be an official spokesman on TV. He looks much smoother as he sits down next to Lin Jing, and his tone is much gentler. "The culprit who attacked you and murdered your classmate has been caught. We just need you to assist us with a routine statement; can you do that?"

This looks nothing like a routine statement; it looks more like a trial.

Li Qian isn't stupid, so she asks, "Then why am I tied up?"

Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrows, snaps his fingers, and the ropes are undone.

The girl is startled by this, but soon lifts her head with forced calm and meets Zhao Yunlan's gaze. She unconsciously shifts around in her chair and rubs the rope marks on her wrists. Finally she says with false bravado, "If you've caught the murderer already, then what's there left to ask? I've already told you everything. What time is it? I want to go home."

Lin Jing slams his palm on the table in an impeccable 'bad cop' act. "Don't give me that bullshit, just answer our questions! Are you trying

to cover for the culprit? What's your motive? What was your relationship with the killer?"

Li Qian is taken aback by his fierce style.

Where Lin Jing's face is flushed with anger, Zhao Yunlan takes over as good cop, pretending to grab him by the shoulder and hold him back. He asks Li Qian pleasantly, "August 31st, ten twenty at night, you saw the victim Lu Ruomei by the entrance of the university; you also saw the thing that was tailing her. We have confirmed all this, so the case is basically solved. But there's something I personally would like to know. Since when have you been able to see ghosts? Did it start after you used the old engraved sundial?"

Li Qian darts a quick glance at Lin Jing, and concedes defeat. She drops her eyes and nods quickly, biting her lip.

Zhao Yunlan's slender fingers gently tap on the table. "Legend says that the sundial was crafted from the Three-Life Stone, and inlaid with the scales of a fish from the River of Forgetfulness. It has the power to bring back the dead, at the cost of one's own lifespan; and once you have used the sundial, you'll get so close to death that you start seeing the world of the dead superimposed on the world of the living, right?"

Li Qian stares at Zhao Yunlan's fingers, and nods without saying a word. Her shoulders are shaking a little.

Zhao Yunlan leans back in his chair.

"You're a good, filial kid," he sighs. "Countless people boast they're 'filial to parents, obedient to teachers', but if they had the Sundial of Reincarnation in front of them, I wonder how many young people would be willing to exchange their life for that of their deceased relatives?"



The Ghost Slayer interrupts. "The Sundial of Reincarnation is one of the Four Mystical Artefacts from the Underworld. They can disrupt the order of yin and yang; humans should not use them frivolously."

Like everyone else, Li Qian doesn't dare look at him, but as she listens, she twists her fingers together and finally says with difficulty, "I didn't know what it was... I only heard it was an old object with supernatural abilities. My grandma had a stroke while I was at school, and at first nobody noticed. By the time someone did, it was too late to treat it. When I came to see her, she was already... She raised me after my parents abandoned me; we had only each other to depend on... Do you know what that feels like? I couldn't even cry, I couldn't believe she was just gone like that, just like that... Why do people die?"

"So you found the Sundial," Zhao Yunlan says.

"I thought I was going crazy, who would believe such a thing? But it really worked..." Li Qian glances at Zhao Yunlan, and looks back down. "I thought, what's there to be afraid of? I'm still young, maybe I can live to a hundred, even if I give her half I can still live to fifty, why wouldn't I bring her back? If humans shouldn't use it, why did I find it right when I needed it? And why did it respond to my wish?"

# Chapter 19

This question silences everyone. After a while, the Ghost Slayer speaks.

"You were determined to resurrect her, whatever the cost... sometimes when your will is strong enough, anything is possible; but that does not mean you were right."

Li Qian's eyes turn red; she looks the other way, not willing to let anyone see her weakness.

She says in a dull voice, "Yes, I'm just mortal, no matter what life throws at me – my only family suddenly passes away, my parents despise me, I struggle to pay tuition, and I can't even find a job here; I'm pathetic, aren't I? I have to endure all of that, so it seems I really shouldn't have brought grandma back, I should've just died with her."

Zhao Yunlan just looks at her calmly and doesn't interrupt.

Li Qian laughs coldly. "I'm like a tortoise, crawling on the ground slowly and strenuously, just for a passer-by to kick me and make me land on my back; when I painfully get back on all fours, I get kicked again; isn't it hilarious?"

This girl is filled with resentment and anger, although she seems to be trying her best to restrain it.

Guo Changcheng's face heats up with embarrassment: he knows he's neither smart nor hard-working, only a muddle-headed fool, but a job just fell into his lap. He stands up and says, "I... I'll get you a glass of water."

Li Qian is too preoccupied to notice him.

Zhao Yunlan asks, "The sundial responded to you, and your grandma survived, but she was still unwell afterwards; did you take care of her?"

"Who else could have done it," Li Qian says without an expression. "My parents only agreed to take her in when they heard she was gonna die in order to save face."

Zhao Yunlan nods. "You had to study, earn your own tuition and living expenses, and you also had to take care of her. That must have been tough?"

Lin Jing is a bit surprised: he thought Zhao Yunlan wanted to get her to talk about the incident with the hungry ghost, since she'd lied about it before, but now he isn't sure what the Chief is trying to get out of her.

What's the point in asking these questions?

But the Ghost Slayer doesn't seem impatient at all, so Lin Jing doesn't say anything and keeps his doubts to himself.

Guo Changcheng fusses around and hands Li Qian a glass of warm water; the girl takes it and doesn't say anything. She stares at the glass, which is shaking in her hands.

"She always woke up at half past four in the morning, every day, and she always wanted to make me breakfast. But her dementia was getting worse. One time she was cooking milk, and it spilled on the stove, almost causing a gas leak. So I had to wake up at half past four every day too, and make breakfast before she could mess things up. At noon, whether or not I had lessons or projects or was working for a tutor, I still had to take a one-hour bus back home every day to make her lunch, make sure she took her medicine, and then rush back to school. I didn't even have time to eat lunch myself. At night, I had to settle her before I could do any studying, and she

was always babbling and interrupting and wouldn't sleep before ten. I'd work until midnight, sometimes even later, until I fell asleep at the table."

Li Qian takes a deep breath, looking completely exhausted. "Was it tough?" She gives a bitter smile, takes a sip of water, and says coldly, "Let's not waste any more time, there's no use talking about this. What else do you want to ask about the case? Just ask."

Zhao Yunlan taps on the file in his hands. "Sorry to be insensitive, but it must be much easier for you now that your grandmother has passed away?"

Li Qian stares at him. "What do you mean?"

Zhao Yunlan stares back. "I meant what I said, literally."

Li Qian jumps up, her lip trembling. Half the water spills across the table. "Is this how the police work? You detain innocent citizens for no reason and make false accusations?"

"Sit down, calm down." Zhao Yunlan wipes the water off the table with some paper tissues. "What I said is just common sense, isn't it? I'm not accusing you of anything. Feelings cannot be crimes; even if you wanted to blow up the Pentagon, as long as you don't do it, no one can blame you."

Li Qian says stiffly, "I want to go home; you can't detain me."

Zhao Yunlan looks at her, and nods. "All right, I'll leave out the irrelevant parts; you told me this morning you saw the victim Luo Rumei at the University gate, and a 'shadow' was following her; do you remember what the shadow looked like?"

Li Qian frowns. "I didn't see it clearly, I can't remember."

Zhao Yunlan smiles; his dimples deepen, but his eyes aren't smiling, and his gaze is sharp. He focuses on his hands folded on the table, and says slowly, "Maybe you wouldn't remember a passer-by, that's normal... but how can you forget something so frightening? If you don't remember, why are you shaking?"

Li Qian freezes and her fingers tighten.

Zhao Yunlan says more harshly, "Didn't you tell me it was black, a little short, and a little fat?"

Li Qian pales.

"Revoking your testimony is a bad idea. Tell me, did the shadow look like you described it the last time?"

With his years of experience, Lin Jing is able to use Li Qian's state of diffuse fear to his advantage. He can tell that she's starting to crack, and immediately seizes the moment. He slams his hand on the desk and shouts, "Say it!"

Zhao Yunlan has been layering on the threats, stretching her nerves to the breaking point, and Lin Jing snaps them clean through.

"Yes! So what!?" Li Qian blurts out.

"Oh, a little short, a little fat," Zhao Yunlan repeats slowly, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "So was it male or female, young or old?"

Everyone here except Li Qian knows what the hungry ghost looked like... there's no telling whether it was male, female, young or old; it wasn't human at all. It was a bony monster taller than any human, with a giant stomach and scythe hands.

Lin Jing and Guo Changcheng are looking at Li Qian with suspicion. The Ghost Slayer's terrifying aura is unchanged. Li Qian, still naive,

feels watched by countless eyes with cold expressions, all of them knowing her secrets.

She panics.

Zhao Yunlan lowers his voice and whispers, "I lied to you; people's memories do blur, especially if they're frightened. That's why eyewitness testimony sometimes isn't accurate. That thing scared you; your brain might want to protect you from fear and shut down the memory as a defence mechanism. Then your imagination fills in the blanks. So what you told us... could just be what you think you're most afraid of."

Guo Changcheng realises only then that he was too gullible before. This really isn't just routine questioning, it's a trial. He doesn't know what happened, but he has a bad feeling about it.

He can barely catch a breath, caught between the Ghost Slayer's unmovable presence on one side and the relentless pace of the interrogation on the other.

Li Qian's face turns deathly pale with defeat.

Zhao Yunlan is no longer faking a smile. "Now can you tell me why you wanted to jump off the building this morning?"

Li Qian's chest rises and falls sharply.

"You didn't sleep last night, did you? When you ran up to the roof, was there a moment when you thought that if you killed yourself, you'd be freed from this curse and be forgiven?" Zhao Yunlan laughs coldly. "Little girl, I'm a few years older than you. Let me call you a child – many children like you aren't afraid of death, because they're too young to comprehend it fully. Especially you, you're so... determined and impulsive, you think you aren't afraid of death at all."

Li Qian instinctively sneers back, but her voice is weak, "What... what makes you say that? How do you know I don't understand death? I know how it feels, I've seen it! The heart stops, breathing stops, her body... turns cold, becomes a corpse, becomes inhuman... and I can't find her, can't see her anymore, can't ever see her again."

"Li Qian," Zhao Yunlan interrupts, "the thing you understand and fear is not death, but separation. You couldn't accept your grandma leaving you suddenly."

The interrogation room is entirely silent; Li Qian shivers like a fallen leaf caught in the wind.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "The shadow you saw tailing the victim, was it... old, dressed in cotton clothes, with a fake hair bun on her head?"

At his words, everyone's expression turns from confusion to shock.

Li Qian screams, her face distorting frighteningly.

*Is she going crazy?* Guo Changcheng thinks; dumbfounded. He doesn't understand what's going on. He glances at the boss, whose fingers are twitching as if he really wants to put a cigarette in his mouth and is barely holding himself back.

Zhao Yunlan's gaze is calm and serious; the light hits his face and his wrinkled but still snow-white shirt, and suddenly he looks like a person from another world.

He takes out a photo; it's a photo of Li Qian's grandmother, wearing a gentle smile on her face. Guo Changcheng recognises her as the old lady who pounced forward to protect Li Qian from the hungry ghost.

Zhao Yunlan sets the photo in front of Li Qian, then folds his hands to prop up his chin, which has sprouted a bit of stubble after this neverending workday. "This is Wang Yufen, born in spring 1940. She

died last month; cause of death was an accidental overdose of diabetes medicine."

Li Qian stares at the photo with wide eyes. Guo Changcheng almost fears they'll pop out of their sockets.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "Your grandmother is your only family, you grew up with her. The two of you must've been incredibly close. You used the Sundial of Reincarnation, giving half your life to bring her back. When her dementia grew worse, you cared for her. My colleagues tell me that your online records show you buying almost nothing but products for the elderly. According to the doctor, even as her mind declined, your grandmother was never aggressive. So can you tell me what made you think that old grandmother would harm you after her death? Why are you so afraid of her?"

Li Qian seems to have turned into a wax figure.

Zhao Yunlan's voice softens; it's almost as if he's telling a bedtime story to a toddler. "Why don't you say anything, Li Qian? I'll ask you one last time. If you don't tell the truth now, you won't get another chance. You'll never be free for the rest of your life; lies will always be lies, and they'll haunt you forever like a curse."

Someone else... said something similar to her today.

Li Qian slowly raises her head, her eyes dull.

Zhao Yunlan leans forward and fixes her with his gaze. "The Sundial of Reincarnation connected your souls, yours and your grandmother's; normally you would've died together. But you're still alive... so your grandma must have died earlier than destined. I kept thinking, what went wrong? Did the Underworld make a mistake, or did someone trap her living soul?"

"But then I realised there's another possibility: the Sundial could have disconnected from her. And that would mean that the person



who brought her back is also the one who killed her.

"An old person with dementia is like a child – they have no understanding, but they can be greedy and grab small snacks left around the house to eat. So can you tell me who put that bottle of diabetes pills next to the candy jar?"

The interrogation room is so quiet one could have heard a pin drop.

Li Qian first seemed terrified, her panic ballooning, but suddenly it burst, and her expression now is strangely calm.

Guo Changcheng holds his breath.

He hears Li Qian's hoarse voice break the silence; softly, she says, "It was me."



## Chapter 20

"When I was small, grandma always woke me up in the mornings when I had to go to school, and helped me braid my hair. I was tired, and I always leaned back against her body and dozed while she combed my hair. When she was done, she gently tapped the back of my head and said, 'Wake up, sleepyhead.' Then she walked me to school, and told me stories on the way - all the best parts from *Journey to the West*<sup>34</sup>. She knew the whole *Legends of the Sui and Tang Dynasties*<sup>35</sup> by heart, too, and she could tell them better than any audiobook. My parents didn't love me, so whenever anyone asked me, I always told them that grandma was my favourite person in the world."

Li Qian recounts as if only speaking to herself. Zhao Yunlan finally takes out a cigarette and plays around with it.

Guo Changcheng freezes and asks, "Then... you stopped liking her?"

Li Qian looks at him intently. "I remember you said you'd have given your life to bring your grandmother back, but your family didn't have a Sundial; you're really lucky."

Guo Changcheng looks at her dumbly and struggles to think of a reason. "Was it because she was too much of a burden, taking care of her was too exhausting, too..."

Li Qian's eyes redden as if bleeding, and she stares at him coldly. Her expression is cruel and almost inhuman, but at the same time utterly human. She interrupts him, "Don't insult me with such a stupid reason."

Guo Changcheng's face turns red.

"She slowly became a different person. She didn't remember anything, she kept babbling on and on about the same things incoherently. She would pee her pants all the time, and when people looked at her, she'd just giggle. When she ate, the food got everywhere, and she drooled a lot. No matter what I was doing, how busy I was, she would always just follow me around the house, nattering incomprehensibly, day after day!" Li Qian takes a breath. "I saw her every day, and all I could think was: this is what I got in exchange for half my life."

An icy smile appears on her distraught face. Guo Changcheng feels like his heart is being ruthlessly crushed.

"The grandma that I wanted never came back. I paid a high price and all I got was..." Li Qian's face twists viciously, and she spits out the words, "...a monster that looked like her."

Her eyes stare straight into Guo Changcheng's soul. "I hated her. I wanted to kill her whenever I saw her, every single day of the year. I wanted to kill her, but still I had to patiently and gently ask her what she wanted to eat, whether she needed to go to the bathroom, whether she was tired or cold; and she would just giggle at me like an idiot."

Guo Changcheng's hands are trembling on his knees.

"The Sundial tricked me, you know? You can't bring back the dead. I didn't get my grandma back. My grandma used to be the most caring person. In the village where I grew up, we had no air conditioner, and she waved a fan for me every night when I went to bed. How could she turn into a monster? How could she turn into a monster who tortured me day after day!?" Li Qian gives a sharp laugh. "You don't understand anything, so don't try to judge me! When she was alive she wouldn't leave me alone, and now she's dead she still won't leave me alone! I—"

"She'll leave you alone now," Guo Changcheng interrupts her; he didn't realise he could speak in such a harsh tone. "She disappeared; the hungry ghost was coming for you, and you were possessed... she stepped in to protect you, and the hungry ghost killed her. She died again; we all saw it, only you didn't."

Li Qian freezes.

Guo Changcheng lowers his head, distraught. He's on the verge of tears, but he doesn't know for which of them he's so sad. "Even if you had seen it, you'd have thought she was trying to harm you, right? But... she wasn't. She wasn't trying to hurt you, she didn't blame you, she wasn't trying to get revenge."

Li Qian still sits there, dumbstruck.

*But you have fallen out of love, and claim that's how it always goes.*<sup>36</sup>

"Murder is not our department," Zhao Yunlan says, standing up and patting Guo Changcheng on the shoulder. "Let's go, she can stay here for the night. Tomorrow morning, Zhu Hong will call our colleagues from Criminal Investigations, and they'll take it from there. I'll call Professor Shen in the morning to tell him what happened... ah, anything else, Your Honour?"

The Ghost Slayer walks up to Li Qian. His aura makes her cower instinctively.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not concerned with the living," the Ghost Slayer says, "but it is related to the Artefacts, so I must ask: where is the Sundial now?"

"It's... at my place," Li Qian whispers. "My parents rented us a small apartment; they never come visit."

"Address?"

"Room 207, Unit Three, No. 101 South City Street."

"Thank you." The Ghost Slayer nods, and looks at Li Qian for a little longer. At last, he says, "When we meet again in the Underworld, you shall be treated fairly."

Guo Changcheng mindlessly follows Zhao Yunlan as they walk the Ghost Slayer out; still upset, he turns around to look at Li Qian one last time.

The Ghost Slayer leaves immediately to retrieve the Sundial of Reincarnation before sunrise.

With that, the room returns to a normal temperature, and the frozen windows gradually thaw out. The air conditioner returns to its normal operation, but Guo Changcheng still feels cold inside. He only walks numbly after Zhao Yunlan, looking like he might want to say something.

Zhao Yunlan picks up his car keys and briefcase, and gives him a glance. "Aren't you going home?"

"Chief Zhao." Guo Changcheng looks at his feet. "Can a ghost reincarnate again... after being killed by a hungry ghost?"

Zhao Yunlan frowns. "Probably not."

"So... so the old lady, she's really gone?"

Zhao Yunlan pretends to be deep in thought, then suddenly smiles; he takes out a small bottle and waves at Guo Changcheng like calling a dog. "I almost forgot; come here, kid."

Guo Changcheng comes over, confused.

"Take this; the Ghost Slayer gave it to me. His Honour sometimes shows mercy and gives people a way out." Zhao Yunlan stuffs the

bottle in his hand, and ambles over to the cat's bed; he covers the sleeping cat's mouth playfully and watches as Da Qing makes a snoring sound, stretches his claws and scratches him a few times.

"Whoever comes in early in the morning, remember to tell the canteen to make some grilled dried fish."

Guo Changcheng examines the small glass bottle curiously, and his eyes widen.

The old lady is inside the bottle!

She's only the size of a thumbnail, quietly sitting there and smiling softly at him.

Then, the wrinkles on her face rapidly disappear, her hair grows and turns from white to black; her teeth grow back, and her body starts slimming. Soon, her face looks thirty years old, then twenty, then she shrinks and shrinks... finally, she turns into a baby.

The infant closes her eyes and disappears inside the bottle.

Guo Changcheng shouts in shock, "She... she's gone!"

"That's a Bottle of Rebirth; she has entered reincarnation again." Lin Jing stands behind him. "From birth to death, and from death to birth, the cycle of life and death will continue for eternity."

Lin Jing finishes, mutters a Buddhist mantra with lowered eyes, and says, "Time to get off work, let's go. Come to work at nine tomorrow. There's breakfast in the cafeteria at eight, so come earlier if you like; don't be late."

Guo Changcheng is incredibly relieved. He carefully puts the bottle into his bag and happily goes home.

Lin Jing turns around and says to Zhao Yunlan, "The Ghost Slayer didn't give you anything. Li Qian shouldn't have used the Sundial, and the old lady died for her willingly; that's all karma, and the Ghost Slayer wouldn't intervene with destiny."

Zhao Yunlan snorts and says, "All right, you're smart, you got me, happy now?"

"It's just that I heard you don't like this trainee because he only got in due to his uncle; why did you have to make up a story to console him then?"

Zhao Yunlan lights a cigarette and impatiently gestures for him to go, "Because I wanted to. Now why don't you just get lost?"

Lin Jing shakes his head and sighs. When it seems like he's about to voice more opinions, Zhao Yunlan glares at him, and Lin Jing decides that discretion is the better part of valour. He quickly snatches his cup from his desk and escapes.

Zhao Yunlan locks the door and is about to go home for some much-needed sleep. But suddenly, he thinks of the Ghost Slayer and becomes curious about the Four Mystical Artefacts. Shamelessly prepared to skip work the next day, he drives to the address Li Qian gave.

When he arrives, he finds the apartment building is shrouded in a menacing dark mist. He quickly parks the car and runs into the building with his gun drawn.

A gigantic black hole is hanging above the rooftop, like the gaping maw of a monster. The elevator is out of service, so Zhao Yunlan runs up the stairs straight to the roof, which is already littered with corpses. On closer look he finds they're all monstrous creatures: three-headed ones, double-bellied ones, half-human and half-skeletons... all beheaded, without exception. The moonlight makes



everything look covered in blood, and the Ghost Slayer is holding his blade against someone's neck.

That someone is not fully human; its entire face is covered with tumours, disgusting and terrifying.

"What's wrong, Your Honour? Aren't you just here for the Sundial? How did it turn into a massacre?" Zhao Yunlan tries to approach him, but his path is completely blocked by corpses.

The Ghost Slayer hears him, but doesn't answer. He says to the deformed figure, "I will ask you one final time; where is the Sundial?"

The monster turns its face until it's looking straight at Chief Zhao. Only then does it speak. "My master has some words for Your Honour... For centuries you have dedicated yourself to this job, avoiding the one you love like the plague; it seems like the pinnacle of self-restraint. But are you in fact afraid of losing control?"

The Ghost Slayer says nothing, but the air becomes more frigid.

"My master pities Your Honor for your deep affection for this person, so he arranged for him to meet you. He wanted to test whether you truly have no desire—"

The Ghost Slayer cuts off its head in one neat motion; a big burst of blood explodes outward with a nauseating stink. A strong wind gusts across the rooftop, forcing Zhao Yunlan to take cover and close his eyes. When the wind stops, the rooftop is empty: of the corpses and monsters, nothing remains.

The Ghost Slayer turns around and waves goodbye. Without a word, he disappears into a black portal. To Zhao Yunlan, his departure seems rather hasty and his posture too tense, very unlike his usual calm self.

The Ghost Slayer is feared by ghosts, spirits and even gods; who would dare challenge him like that?

The Sundial of Reincarnation... who stole it?

## **Awl of Mountains and Rivers**

# Chapter 21

No. 4 Bright Avenue isn't a spider cave, nor is it a skeleton lair.

When it's daytime, not a single shadow of a ghost can be seen, and the reception room is staffed by a kind-eyed, normal old man. Later, of course, Guo Changcheng finds out that the old man isn't so normal after all: he likes to make bone carvings and keeps a pile of bones in a corner of the meeting room. If one is careless in opening a window, yellowish bone dust flies everywhere.

The office has great natural lighting and each person has their own desk and desktop computer; the office is decorated with plants and well air-conditioned. A cleaner comes in every day at 2pm. The pantry room has a fridge and lockers, which contain cat food, yoghurt, fruit and other snacks for everyone.

One time, Guo Changcheng even sees an entire drawer in the fridge filled with thinly sliced raw meat, the kind used for hotpot. He wonders who would eat hotpot in summer, until one day he sees that great beauty Zhu Hong pull out a bag and eat the meat raw from it like potato chips, blood dribbling.

The next day, Zhu Hong takes sick leave; reason: inevitable monthly problem.

But it's not the kind of problem everyone thinks. On the third day, she comes back, and Guo Changcheng's jaw drops to find her slithering around on a long python tail. Zhu Hong keeps eating raw meat for a few days, but after that, her tail is replaced by normal human legs, and she eats like a human once again.

There's another member in Chief Zhao's investigations team besides snake beauty, fake monk, and fat black cat. Half a month after the incident of the hungry ghost, he comes back from what looks to have

been an exhausting work trip. He sits silently at his desk the entire afternoon claiming work expenses, then lays his head down and immediately falls asleep. In the end, Chief Zhao personally tells him to head home.

Guo Changcheng looks at the nameplate on his desk, which reads 'Chu Shuzhi'; everyone calls him Chu-ge<sup>37</sup>, but Guo Changcheng is intimidated by him and doesn't dare speak to him. He's around the same age as Lin Jing; extremely skinny, with sunken cheeks. The fact that he looks like a living skeleton makes his face all the more harsh; he's always frowning.

Perhaps it's Guo Changcheng's imagination, but Chu Shuzhi seems to frown even more when he sees him.

They usually don't have much work. Except for the few busy days when Guo Changcheng started, he realises this job must be the legendary 'good pay, easy work, and close to home' type. Only a handful of cases come in every month, and the Chief usually just sends one or two of the team to investigate. Their most basic rule is: 'we catch ghosts, not humans'. Since crimes in the realm of the living are generally committed by the living, all they need to do is make the usual rounds, file a report and hand the case to another department.

Most of the time, everyone is reading books, surfing the web, chitchatting, and killing time until they can go home.

But Guo Changcheng realises that there are quite a few procedures to follow when handling a case: first, send someone to the crime scene, then file a report to the Chief; Chief Zhao will then decide whether or not to take the case. If he decides to take it, he'll file another report to the higher authorities; if it's an urgent matter, it usually takes about a working day before the report goes through and they're officially assigned responsibility for the case. After that, Zhao Yunlan personally goes to talk to the MPS officer in charge, to make sure the SIU can work the case without interference.

By coincidence, one day in mid-July diverges from that routine: someone is killed by a ghost while no-one's in the office. Da Qing detects some fishy Underworld smell, so the Chief has no choice but to investigate in person, and only gets the chance to file all necessary documents afterwards.

Lin Jing's butt doesn't leave his chair for three days, just to file all the documents for this case.

And so Guo Changcheng, in the absence of a case, survives the three-month probation period and miraculously remains at the SIU.

Even more miraculously, Zhao Yunlan seems to have forgotten how keen he initially was to throw him out, and readily signs the papers for his official employment. Guo Changcheng has gradually got used to the human resources department being empty during daytime and happily runs over there to get his official employment form filed.

Da Qing studies his disappearing back, and climbs up on Zhao Yunlan's desk with his tail cocked. "Men sure are fickle; at first you wanted to kick him out more than anything, but now you're letting him stay for good."

Zhao Yunlan is focused on texting and says without looking up, "The virtue<sup>38</sup> all over his body is as thick as the Oxford dictionary. Treat him as a mascot; he'll bring us good luck. Plus, he's hilarious to watch."

Da Qing is curious. "What virtue?"

Zhao Yunlan points at his drawer, and the black cat paws it open. Inside is a huge folder containing documents, pictures of volunteer work, donation account books, etc.; the information spans over a decade. There's a picture of a postcard on the wall of a rural primary school, and on the postcard is scrawled: "Take care, guys."

Da Qing is shocked. "You mean Guo Changcheng did all of this?"

"Yeah, you know about his family, they're incredibly rich. But when he does these sorts of things he never lets his family know, it's like he's embarrassed. He uses up almost all his pocket money for charity and only leaves a little for himself. That's how he accumulated immense virtue; I saw his aura the other day."

"Oh... someone like that is hard to come by." The black cat looks even plumper than before as he trudges over the desk to peek at the texts in Zhao Yunlan's phone. Contemptuously, he says, "Are you losing your touch? You text him like a million times a day, asking about unimportant stuff all the time. It's been three months, and you're still stuck in the 'asking him out for lunch and dinner' stage?"

Zhao Yunlan sends the message and flicks a finger at the fat cat's head, knocking him onto his butt, "Good things come to those who wait, you don't know shit about this."

Shen Wei's reply appears on the screen: "Sorry, I have a school gathering tonight."

The black cat rolls on the desk, laughing. "School gathering! School gathering! Ahahahaha, noble leader, you can keep boasting about yourself; aren't you the self-proclaimed invincible charmer? What do you usually say: girls can't stop staring at you, cute bottoms drool when they see you? You've been rejected, eh? Hey, Zhao Yunlan, tell me, how does it feel?"

Zhao Yunlan grits his teeth, resisting the urge to have cat meat for dinner.

After the case of the hungry ghost, Zhao Yunlan has kept contacting Shen Wei; initially using his work as an excuse, always bothering the professor with the tiniest progress on Li Qian's case. Lately, he's shamelessly made up all sorts of excuses to ask him out, but the

Professor is incredibly difficult to get a hold of: perhaps he's really busy, or maybe he's avoiding Zhao Yunlan on purpose.

Zhao Yunlan has had enough of the eager and desperate type: the more reserved, subtle and hesitant Shen Wei is, the harder he tries.

Just then, the phone rings, and the nosy cat eavesdrops on the conversation: an unfamiliar voice asks nervously, "Hello... is this Mr Zhao? You offered to buy my grandfather's antique books, is that true?"

Zhao Yunlan's eyes light up. "Yes; when can I get them? The sooner the better, if that's ok with you."

The voice says, "They're rather expensive; do you think—"

"That's not a problem. Just pick a time to meet," says Zhao Yunlan like one of the rich and powerful.

The person on the phone seems very excited and agrees to meet in the afternoon, praising Zhao Yunlan with words like 'you're really an antique enthusiast', and 'you truly understand the value of cultural heritage', before finally hanging up.

Da Qing coldly says, "Right, if charm doesn't get you what you want, money should certainly do the trick. Noble leader, you're really the epitome of a spoilt rich brat. This poor book seller certainly doesn't know you're an idiot who's only into action movies and martial arts novels."

Zhao Yunlan picks up his cheque book and car keys, then grabs Da Qing by the nape, making him squeal, and throws him out of his office.

His colleagues hear the door open; Chu Shuzhi raises his head from a stock market candlestick chart, but only manages to see a shadow flit by. Zhu Hong sighs. "He's out cruising again."

~~~

In the evening, Zhao Yunlan successfully intercepts Professor Shen at the Dragon City University gate.

When Shen Wei sees his car, his eyelids twitch; he lowers his head and pretends not to notice him. He keeps walking briskly towards the car park, while Zhao Yunlan hums a sweet little tune and slowly drives after him. All the students passing by are starting to turn their heads and stare. Shen Wei sighs helplessly and stops. He bends down to knock lightly on the car window. "Officer Zhao, was there something you needed?"

Zhao Yunlan rolls down the window, wearing a bright smile of sunshine and rainbows, and stuffs a big wooden box into the professor's arms. "This is for you."

Shen Wei lifts the lid, takes a glance, and returns the box. "No, this is too valuable, how could I possibly..."

"Hey, listen to me." Zhao Yunlan blocks him with his hand and gives his bullshitting streak free rein. "I have a friend who's moving out of the country. He has a lot of antique books, even some silk and bamboo versions; he can't take them all with him. He doesn't want them to go to waste, and I immediately thought of you. You're the only person who knows how valuable these are, so please help my friend out."

This smooth-talking jerk, he doesn't even blink when he lies.

"I..." Shen Wei barely gets out a word before Zhao Yunlan starts firing away. "Stop being so tactful, aren't we friends? Aren't friends supposed to help each other? I have a dinner party later so I have to go, see you next time; help me keep these safe, and I'll take you out for dinner this weekend."

He steps on the accelerator, not giving Shen Wei a chance to say a word, and speeds off.

Holding the heavy box Zhao Yunlan shoved into his arms, Shen Wei watches the car disappear with mixed feelings.

On the one hand his heart is softening and he really wants to give in and indulge himself just this once; on the other hand, he thinks of what a playboy Zhao Yunlan is, and imagines that he must have done the same things for countless others. Shen Wei grinds his teeth, he really wants to lock him up and... but his conflicted emotions pass, he calms down, and all that remains is unbearable loneliness.

Shen Wei knows that his first meeting with Zhao Yunlan wasn't a coincidence: someone has set him up. The living and the dead walk separate paths... for Zhao Yunlan's sake, he'd better keep his distance.

~~~

His gift has been delivered and he even got a date out of it; Zhao Yunlan whistles merrily, pleased with himself.

There's no fun in being straightforward and explicit. Zhao Yunlan doesn't care for the type who only has a great face and a big butt but no brains. Even when watching a strip tease, it's the ones who never let you see everything who are the sexiest.

Zhao Yunlan thinks that men of taste can't be satisfied with only vulgarity, just like a rich man can't be satisfied with gold chains and villas, but will long for antiques and paintings.

*Shen Wei.* Self-satisfied, Zhao Yunlan checks himself out in the rear-view mirror. He repeats the name and lets it settle in his heart.

Shen Wei is like a priceless antique porcelain vase; even if he can't own it forever, putting it in his house for a few days is well worth the while.



## Chapter 22

This winter in Dragon City is especially cold; the leaves have all fallen before turning yellow. Zhao Yunlan is feeling lazy and can't bring himself to do anything at all. There's nothing to do at work except a few social engagements. Occasionally he harrasses Shen Wei, and the rest of the time he hangs out at home.

Zhao Yunlan moved out from his parents' when he was quite young and bought a 40m<sup>2</sup> studio apartment in the city centre. He lives like a typical bachelor: perfectly put together when he goes out, messier than a pig at home.

Da Qing always feels that this generation's Guardian really is one of the most difficult to deal with. He even changed the Guardian Order into a civil service department and gave it the name 'Special Investigations Unit'. He's capable and well-connected, and observant and decisive on the job, but Da Qing doesn't find him very reassuring. He keeps worrying that one day Zhao Yunlan will just quit his job and work full-time as a frivolous playboy.

But although Da Qing is over a thousand years old, he's still just a cat; Zhao Yunlan's life outside of work is actually not as exciting as the cat imagines.

Zhao Yunlan is probably a classic case of 'off-duty silence syndrome'; a common symptom among busy city-dwellers, but with unknown origin. He has been single for most of his life; partly because of his unusual job, and partly because of his own issues. In public he's well-spoken and confident, but once at home, he becomes taciturn. He's not purposely rude, he just doesn't feel like communicating. If you don't talk to him, he can stay silent for an entire night without an expression on his face, to say nothing of any meaningful hobbies.

If it weren't for one more set of dishes added to the pile every dinnertime, he might not even exist.

The handful of lovers he has had all dumped him for the same reasons: 'lack of communication', 'lack of excitement', 'personality clash', 'no common interests'. There was even this one girl who very furiously said, "You never loved me, I've never had a place in your heart!"

Certainly, Zhao Yunlan is handsome, rich and young; but there are quite a few guys like that in this big city. He does have a lot of savings, but so far hasn't had the will to even buy a decent property. He spends money like water, while the place he lives is a simple apartment block. His apartment looks like a shabby hotel room, and his entire person oozes unreliability.

The date with Shen Wei is on Sunday night, so he has no plans for Saturday. Zhao Yunlan wakes up at noon, hung over, and gets through the day on some stale bread and tea. He does some research on the Four Mystical Artefacts, then plays video games until evening.

Finally, as the night falls, a twinge from his stomach pulls his attention away from the game.

At first he doesn't want to move and tries to appease the cramps with a glass of warm water. Forty minutes later, his stomach's protest grows stronger and stronger and he starts sweating. So he has no choice but to go out and find some food.

It's winter, but he's lazy and only throws on trousers and a long coat on top of his pyjamas; he doesn't even bother to put on socks before stepping out. He steps out of the apartment complex, crosses the road and walks down a small street. At the small restaurant at the intersection, he orders fried rice and congee.

The rice still needs to be fried up, and Zhao Yunlan starts realising that he really should've worn more. He doesn't want to just stand there like a fool; checking his coat pocket, he decides to use the time to buy cigarettes at the nearby convenience store.

As he passes by a dimly lit path - two out of three street lamps broken - he hears a man's voice violently demanding, "Gimme your money, quick!"

Another voice says, "Bro, don't blame us, we don't want to do this either, we're just trying to make a living; you're dressed so well, you must be rich, so just do as we say and nobody has to get hurt, got it?"

*Oh, a robbery?*

New Year's Eve is approaching. People from all trades are around, crooks mixing with honest folk; apparently public security has been lax recently.

Zhao Yunlan slowly saunters forward and takes a closer look: a handful of gangsters have ganged up on a man, and that unfortunate soul is someone rather familiar-looking.

*Shen Wei. Why is he here?*

Shen Wei isn't only polite towards his students, Zhao Yunlan quickly realises. He's like a gentle spring breeze towards his friends, and he's like a gentle spring breeze towards his foes as well. Even when threatened by a group of gangsters, Shen Wei doesn't resist in any way, doesn't even swear; he just obediently takes out his wallet!

The gangsters see how compliant he is and instantly push for more. "Your watch too! Must be a luxury brand worth a bundle, take it off!"

Shen Wei stays silent and calmly takes off his watch.

"Bookworms are good for nothing," Zhao Yunlan thinks, and sighs. He can't bear to look on any longer and walks forward with his hands in his pockets.

The gangsters snatch Shen Wei's watch and shove him roughly. Shen Wei's back hits a wall, and a red string peeks out by his collar.

"Hey, he's wearing something around his neck, might be jade," one of them says. "Or agate? That'd be good, too."

Another one violently tears open Shen Wei's shirt, and indeed there's a small pendant hanging there. It's only the size of a thumbnail, but it catches Zhao Yunlan's eye even from a distance; it sparkles so brightly, the street lights look dim in comparison.

"This... this isn't diamond, is it?" One of the gangsters reaches out for it.

The meek Shen Wei finally frowns, wrapping his fingers around the pendant. "I've given you enough already, don't go too far." His face comes alive with fury; the gangster who tore his shirt is terrified by his cold glare, lets go and stumbles backwards.

But they all soon realise that they needn't be afraid of this man; there's only one of him, and there are several of them. Besides, if he's that strong, why did he give them his money so willingly? For charity?

The gangster closest to Shen Wei raises his hand and goes straight for his face: in his experience, when dealing with someone with glasses, the most efficient way is to knock the glasses off so that they can't see, and kick them down.

But he has only just raised his hand when a violent kick smashes into his back. He stumbles forward, almost spitting out blood. Shen Wei dodges, and the thug crashes right into the wall.

Shen Wei looks up, and to his shock he sees Zhao Yunlan, who rubs his hands and says in a vulgar tone, much like a gangster himself, "It's fucking cold, who's looking for a warm-up?"

The thugs have been startled by the sheer force of his kick, and one of them asks hesitantly, "Who... who are you? Mind your own business, I'm warning you!"

Zhao Yunlan loudly cracks his neck and stomps on the ground a few times as if cold; he says with a dimpled sneer, "I think you're a bit wet behind the ears to be warning me."

Five minutes later, Zhao Yunlan calls the police, demanding they come pick up the trash immediately. He hangs up and gives one of the gangsters rolling on the floor another kick. "You were still drinking breast milk when I first moved here. Next time, better check whose territory you're in before you try anything, understand?"

The thug screams in pain. "Okay... bro, we... we... ow!"

"Who the fuck do you think you're talking to? Who's your fucking bro?" Zhao Yunlan adds another kick. "You think flattery will save your ass? I'm a goddamn cop, not your bro, who the fuck do you think you are? Take off your belts, quick!"

Shen Wei watches him skillfully tie all the gangsters to a lamppost, and smiles callously.

Zhao Yunlan belatedly realises that he just acted out a classic scene of a knight in shining armour swooping in to save a damsel in distress. This coincidence is too beautiful, so beautiful that he might have orchestrated it himself.

Zhao Yunlan feels pumped; the world seems prettier and the air seems fresher. Even his stomach hurts less.



He hands Shen Wei back his wallet and watch. "Never thought I'd see you here; are you all right?"

Shen Wei gracefully wipes some dust off of himself and takes his belongings. "Thank you."

Zhao Yunlan's attention falls on the pendant around Shen Wei's neck. At a closer look, he can see that it's a small transparent sphere, and some substance inside is gleaming brightly. It's probably some type of fluorescent material.

But he has never seen fluorescent light of this kind before; Zhao Yunlan has the impression that the sphere contains an otherworldly burning flame... almost as if it's alive.

As he looks at the shiny little thing, it feels strangely familiar and intimate.

Zhao Yunlan belatedly realises that he's been staring, so he looks away and says, "Aren't you afraid of radiation? It's so bright, it might be harmful to your body."

Shen Wei tucks the pendant back under his clothes, against his skin. He smiles and says nothing.

Zhao Yunlan isn't the pushy type; when he sees that Shen Wei would rather not talk about it, he stops asking. He buttons up his coat to hide the pyjamas underneath, and says, "These thugs look strong on the outside, but they're actually very cowardly, why are you afraid of them? Have you eaten? Come, I'll treat you to supper, it'll calm you down."

Shen Wei smiles. "You're too generous; I should be treating you." He hesitates, and says while looking behind at the tied-up gangsters, "Actually, they're struggling to survive, too..."

Zhao Yunlan faces the other way and rolls his eyes. Then he remembers something. "Oh right, do you live nearby, Professor Shen? I've never seen you around here before."

Shen Wei's eyes darken. "It's a big city after all, two people may never meet even if they live close together; but some day, perhaps they will start seeing each other all the time. It is all fate."

Zhao Yunlan laughs compliantly... being a professional introvert, he doesn't even know his next door neighbours; his life really has nothing to do with fate.

Shen Wei doesn't say anything more, he just follows behind Zhao Yunlan. Zhao Yunlan doesn't see Shen Wei staring at his back, his eyes obscured by the glasses, his gaze insatiably greedy yet marked with self-restraint.

## Chapter 23

In the few times they've met, Zhao Yunlan always felt Shen Wei's restrained affection for him. But somehow, once Zhao Yunlan starts reciprocating, Shen Wei acts like the monk from Journey to the West confronted by a succubus; he shuts down and starts clearing his mind.

Zhao Yunlan has never met anyone like Shen Wei; he's gentle and benevolent, he never argues with anyone and treats everyone with kindness no matter who they are. It's as if he's a gentleman who stepped out of pious stories of the past, set in his antique ways.

Zhao Yunlan can't seem to figure him out.

Originally, Zhao Yunlan thought of taking him to a high-end clubhouse with a Western restaurant: the perfect place for a romantic date night, because Western food is fancy. But Shen Wei would certainly refuse, and personally, Zhao Yunlan isn't a fan of greasy food and cold, raw vegetables.

It's not every day you get a chance like this, so Zhao Yunlan is determined not to let it pass. He puts on a relaxed facade and takes Shen Wei back to the hole in the wall where he's already ordered. He amends his order by a bowl of wonton and a few popular dishes; soon the whole table is filled with steaming food.

At this hour, the shop is empty; they're the only ones there. Shen Wei has yet to sit down, but he's already acting nervous and tense.

Zhao Yunlan makes small talk and mentions Li Qian. "She confessed to killing her grandmother; we're following the usual legal process. Her father disowned her, and I heard her mother cried and passed out twice at the trial. No idea why they let things get this bad in the

first place. Let's hope the tribunal will be lenient; she turned herself in and confessed, so she might get a reduced sentence."

Shen Wei remains silent for a minute, then sighs. "I should have taught her better."

Zhao Yunlan is hungry and gobbling his food down. With a mouth full of fried rice, he can't talk, but he looks at Shen Wei with an incredulous gaze, his eyes saying, 'what does this have to do with you?'

Shen Wei looks down and distractedly sips a spoonful of his soup. "In the past, when a student committed a crime, the teacher was considered just as guilty; after all, the goal of education is to teach good morals, and yet one of my students..."

The rest of the sentence is probably not very pleasant. Shen Wei pauses, frowns, and doesn't finish it.

*What kind of bullshit is that, it's not like we're still in a feudal society!* Zhao Yunlan thinks.

But of course, he wants to appear civilised in front of Shen Wei, so he swallows that thought together with the fried rice.

Although Shen Wei has obviously been avoiding Zhao Yunlan the best he can, now that he's sitting with him he doesn't seem impatient, but quite at ease. Also, Zhao Yunlan notices he's considerate and caring; when Zhao Yunlan's chopsticks reach for the same dish three times in a row, he simply pushes it towards him. He also takes charge of the teapot and pours them both tea.

"I can do it myself," Zhao Yunlan says quickly.

"It's hot, don't touch it." Shen Wei evades his hand and pours him some steaming tea. "You're eating too fast, it's not good for your stomach."

Zhao Yunlan wipes his mouth and pretends to be delicate. "I haven't had dinner, so I'm a little hungry; I usually eat very slowly."

Shen Wei smiles, and Zhao Yunlan sees an opportunity to keep talking; but suddenly, the table wobbles, and an empty bowl falls off. Zhao Yunlan swiftly catches it; a lamp sways gently above them.

"Earthquake?" Shen Wei says.

The trembling stops shortly. Zhao Yunlan is about to speak, when abruptly, he's filled with an inexplicable dread, as if startling awake from falling a thousand miles in a nightmare.

*Something... something is happening.*

Zhao Yunlan doesn't know what or why, but there's a warning voice in his head.

Maybe the fried rice was a bit cold, or maybe the congee was a bit hot; after he rapidly stuffed all kinds of food down his throat, his stomach feels even worse than before. Once the strange feeling has passed, he feels like his insides are being stabbed by needles.

"What's wrong?" Shen Wei asks.

"Ow..." Zhao Yunlan curls up, elbows slamming on the table.

Shen Wei supports his shoulder, "Where does it hurt? Is it your stomach?"

Even though he's unwell, Zhao Yunlan still remembers to take advantage of the situation; he grabs Shen Wei by the wrist and surreptitiously grazes the back of his hand, not softly and not heavily, a little seductively but not too obviously so, and says with a nasal voice, "A little, you jinxed it."

Shen Wei doesn't know what to say; he rapidly withdraws his hand. "I'll bring you some hot soup."

Zhao Yunlan can't figure out whether Shen Wei is shy or uninterested, so he sits upright with a gentle smile, pretending to be decent. But soon, karma strikes, and his stomach-ache grows more severe; he can't help but curl up, and his forehead breaks out in a cold sweat.

Of course, he still manages to stealthily call the waitress for the bill.

Shen Wei brings back a hot wonton soup, but Zhao Yunlan only eats a little, then waves his hand; he really can't eat any more. Even his lips are turning pale.

Shen Wei studies his expression. "I should take you to the hospital after all."

Zhao Yunlan forces a smile onto his face, "This is nothing, why would I need to go to the hospital? I have medicine at home."

He tries to stand up, holding on to the table, but quickly falls back down on the chair.

Shen Wei's expression becomes serious. "No, you have to go to the hospital."

Zhao Yunlan presses against his stomach with one hand, and pulls Shen Wei back with the other. "They'll make me swallow paint-flavoured barium, or force me to have a gastroscopy, which is worse than death. Please don't let them torture me."

Shen Wei frowns deeply.

"Besides, I want to take you to watch a play tomorrow, I've already bought—"

"Return it," Shen Wei interrupts him, and helps him get up carefully. "I am not going... excuse me, can I have the—"

Shen Wei has yet to say 'bill', and the waitress hands him the receipt and change.

These courting tricks... Shen Wei glares at Zhao Yunlan and thinks: 'you deserve to hurt.'

Zhao Yunlan looks down at his shoes and smirks.

Finally, due to Zhao Yunlan's determined refusal and resistance, Shen Wei has no choice but to take him home.

It's his first time in Zhao Yunlan's apartment. The lights are off, and he trips over an open umbrella. Winter in Dragon City isn't particularly rainy; the last time it rained was over a month ago. Only someone as lazy as a dog would leave the umbrella on the floor for that long.

On the shoe cabinet is a bag of clothes from the dry cleaner; it was delivered two days ago.

Shen Wei looks around the room. Shirts, trousers, and a wool coat are piled all over the couch, and various books and a laptop are scattered on the bed; there's not even space to sit, let alone lie down.

Shen Wei silently looks at Zhao Yunlan, puts him in the only unoccupied corner of the couch, and starts cleaning up the bed.

Zhao Yunlan curls up on the couch, painfully and happily gazing at Shen Wei's beautiful legs; his mouth is watering.

Shen Wei turns around. "Where do you normally put these?"

"On the bed during the day, on the floor at night."

Shen Wei sighs; he does that a lot around Zhao Yunlan.

He swiftly clears the desk, then piles up the books there and puts the laptop on the nightstand. "Come on, lie down, I will get the medicine... where is it?"

Zhao Yunlan points at a small cupboard below the desk.

Shen Wei says casually, "Get in bed and take off your outerwear."

Zhao Yunlan hesitates. "If I take them off, you might say I took advantage of you."

Shen Wei touches Zhao Yunlan's forehead, which is covered in cold sweat. Shen Wei can imagine how painful it is, and his heart wrenches; he'd rather endure the pain for him. But the jerk he's trying to care for only knows how to joke around.

It really feels like a waste of affection. Shen Wei's face grows stern. "Stop that nonsense and take them off."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't hesitate any longer and rips off his coat and trousers without restraint. Seemingly without a care, he stands in front of Shen Wei in his pyjamas, half his chest uncovered.

Shen Wei's face reddens in an instant.

Zhao Yunlan shamelessly shows off his physique. "You told me to take them off."

Shen Wei swiftly looks away, fluffs up the pillow and spreads out the rolled-up duvet. "Give me the cup, I'll help you pour... Zhao Yunlan, why are you bare-footed!?"

When Zhao Yunlan sits on the bed and takes off his shoes, Shen Wei sees his freezing feet.



Zhao Yunlan says dismissively, "I was just going out for a quick meal, if I wore socks I'd have to wash them..."

Shen Wei grips his feet, and even though his hands are cold, they're still much warmer in comparison. Zhao Yunlan startles and tries to pull away, but Shen Wei holds on tightly and starts massaging an acupoint.

"No no no... wait, I... I... I haven't washed my feet... AH!!"

"Now do you realise it's painful?" Shen Wei frowns. "Your qi is blocked<sup>39</sup>. You never take care of yourself; your bad habits give you a weak stomach, and you..."

He suddenly realises his tone is too intimate, and lowers his head and shuts up.

Zhao Yunlan's feet hurt so much they're starting to feel numb, but he must keep his cool in front of Shen Wei, so he swallows the profanities and pretends to be calm. Miraculously, his feet start warming up and relaxing, and Shen Wei puts them under the duvet.

Shen Wei hands him the medicine, pours him a cup of warm water, and watches him swallow it down.

For a while they have nothing to say; the atmosphere becomes rather awkward.

Zhao Yunlan's pyjamas really suit his wanton self: there are only a handful of buttons, and the collar is open all the way down to below his breastbone. He presses his hand against his stomach, so Shen Wei can just see his beautiful abs.

He forces himself to turn away and start inspecting the room; he sees the leftover bread packaging in the rubbish bin and asks, "What did you eat today?"

Zhao Yunlan lies back on the bed and points at the bin.

"Only that? For the entire day?" Shen Wei's face darkens. "What about last night?"

"Last night I went out with some friends; we drank a lot, I don't remember."

Shen Wei almost can't control his anger; he stewes in silence for half a minute, and forces himself to lower his voice so that he doesn't sound too furious. "You live like this every day?"

"Yeah, so what?"

Shen Wei shoots him a dark look and wordlessly walks over to the kitchen. He opens the fridge and stares at all the empty space inside. Then, he takes out an expired carton of milk... and half a bag of opened cat food.

Shen Wei feels he's about to lose his temper with Zhao Yunlan. Veins are popping up on the back of his hand, and he's clutching the refrigerator door so hard it squeaks.

## Chapter 24

Finally, after a thorough search, Shen Wei finds a pack of instant egg drop soup that hasn't yet expired; apart from water and medication, it's the only edible item in Zhao Yunlan's disastrous apartment.

Zhao Yunlan produces a cigarette and peeks at Shen Wei puttering around in the kitchen, a naughty smile on his face. Who knows what he's imagining.

Shen Wei strides over, calmly takes the cigarette out of his mouth, and twists it out in the ashtray. He slams the soup on the nightstand. "Eat."

Zhao Yunlan blinks, silently picks up the bowl, and ponders while sipping: Professor Shen didn't even get mad when mugged in the street, but he does with Zhao Yunlan.

He considers this for a while, then decides that it's clearly because he's handsome, and Shen Wei is falling for him.

Shen Wei has no idea how much Zhao Yunlan multitasks; even while sipping soup he finds time to be vain.

Shen Wei gets more and more irritated by Zhao Yunlan's apartment. He wonders how a human can live like this. Even a prisoner about to be executed can have one last meal before he goes; what sane person would starve himself like that?

He looks at Zhao Yunlan, and suspects that if he died, no-one would come to collect his corpse.

Abruptly, he says, "Officer Zhao, you're not young anymore, and you've got a stable job; it's time for you to get a girlfriend and start a

family. It's better to have someone to take care of you."

Zhao Yunlan instantly chokes on the MSG-laden egg drop soup, nearly coughing his lungs up.

Shen Wei's hand twitches nervously. He lowers it and hides it behind his back, clenching his fist tightly.

Zhao Yunlan never anticipated Shen Wei would say something like that, and it takes his startled brain a while to catch up. Eventually, he thinks of a plan, and puts the bowl on the nightstand; he decides that his best bet is to show his hand in order to attract sympathy.

"Don't tell me you haven't realised I'm chasing after you?" Zhao Yunlan intentionally speaks slowly and softly; unhurriedly, he raises his head to glance at Shen Wei's face, and finally lets his eyes rest on Shen Wei's tensed-up body.

From Shen Wei's point of view, it looks like Zhao Yunlan is disappointed; if he was already looking worn out, he's now looking even more depressed.

Shen Wei feels as if a fist is crushing the softest spot on his heart.

Zhao Yunlan sneaks a peek at his reaction and feels smug, but he continues to act upset, waving feebly while concealing a smirk.

"Then never mind, thanks for today; I'm fine now, you can go."

Zhao Yunlan is already planning to throw himself at Shen Wei if he comes close, and has even chosen the best lines for the purpose. But unexpectedly, Shen Wei stays silent. After a long time—long enough that he can't help but want to take another peek—Shen Wei says hoarsely, "Then I... Then please rest well."

With that, Shen Wei runs off without looking back.

Zhao Yunlan is speechless. *What the hell! What went wrong with the plan?*

Zhao Yunlan puzzles at it for ages; he slams his head on the pillow, unable to express his feelings in words. Finally, in a daze, he takes out a calendar and turns to today's horoscope. It reads: 'avoid marriage'. So he heartbrokenly concludes that it's not his lucky day.

It feels like a dried steam bun is stuck in his throat, choking him. No longer in the mood for any entertainment, he switches off the lights and rolls over to sleep.

It's almost midnight. The streets become quiet, and apartment lights turn off one by one. There are hardly any cars passing by on the streets; even the occasional gleam of headlights is kept out by the heavy curtains.

The moment the hour and minute hands meet, Zhao Yunlan's wrist-watch buzzes softly, and his eyes instantly snap open despite his seemingly deep slumber.

Suddenly, the sound of wooden clappers echoes through the oppressive darkness; emerging out of thin air and disappearing again into nothing.

The noise is getting closer, and a bland male voice speaks, prolonging every syllable; every word clearly sounds in Zhao Yunlan's ears.

That person chants as if at a funeral, "Make way for the Underworld messenger, living souls retreat!"

Afterwards, the clappers sound three more times.

The curtains, shut all day, part slightly on their own, showing ice crystals forming on the window pane. A flickering white light glints through the gaps, waiting quietly outside the window.

Zhao Yunlan sits up, tidies his clothes, and calls out, "Please come in."

The window unlatches with a creaking sound and opens itself; a breeze brings a bitter chill and Zhao Yunlan's skin tingles with goosebumps.

A black shadow holding a white paper lantern floats outside the sixteenth floor window.

That shadowy 'person' is also made of paper, as tall as a regular human. Its white paper face has lifeless eyes painted on it and its giant frightening mouth extends above the cheekbones. It could take on Lao Wu from No. 4 Bright Avenue in a beauty contest.

Zhao Yunlan opens the lowest drawer in the nightstand and takes out a pottery tray, some paper money and incense. He lights the money and incense and puts them into the tray, and nods respectfully. "Just a little token of respect... Your Honour, what urgent matter brings you here?"

The paper person twitches its mouth stiffly, grateful for the bribe.

People of high status and power among the living never pay their respects to messengers of the Underworld, but the Guardian of this generation is different; even if he forgets the most important matters, he never forgets a little 'tribute'.

The paper person cups its hands in front of its chest, and says politely, "The recent escape of the hungry ghost has infuriated the Underworld Kings<sup>40</sup>. They have ordered a thorough investigation of the three realms, and now all living, dead and condemned souls have been recorded in this book, and merged with the *Book of Life and Death*. This humble servant has been especially ordered by the Ten Kings to present the Guardian with a copy."

The paper person courteously offers up a black notebook to Zhao Yunlan with both hands. It looks like a normal notebook and the cover feels like soft leather, but it's incredibly light—as light as just a few sheets of paper.

Zhao Yunlan rubs the paper lightly and sniffs the pages. "Mulberry paper and sea dragon ink; it's the *Book of Life and Death* and the *Record of Virtue*, with a soul-seeking talisman stuck on, right?"

The paper messenger says calmly, "You have keen eyes, Lord Guardian; presumably there's no need for this lowly one to explain what it can do."

"If you get someone's name and birth date<sup>41</sup> and write them on the talisman," Zhao Yunlan says, "or you wrap a strand of their hair around it, you can see into their past life and afterlife."

As Zhao Yunlan speaks, he casually flips through the notebook, and a piece of paper falls out. "Huh? An arrest order?"

It's an empty piece of rice paper, but as it touches Zhao Yunlan's hand, a cloud of black mist oozes out. In the mist a face emerges; it's a hunchbacked humanoid with an enormous bald head, laden with tumours... the same as the monster that was executed by the Ghost Slayer.

Zhao Yunlan remains expressionless, and asks, "What's this?"

The Underworld messenger says, "This creature is humanoid but not human; we call it a demon beast. It speaks human language, but is violent and ferocious; it preys on human flesh and souls. If you see one, Lord Guardian, please be careful and kill it as soon as possible; it's afraid of fire and light."

A demon beast...

The Underworld messenger babbles on, but doesn't mention where the beast comes from, what its nature is, or why it must be killed. Zhao Yunlan is rather intrigued by the 'humanoid but not human' description.

He turns around, nonchalantly puts the arrest order back into the notebook and adds a handful more paper money notes into the tray. He smiles sweetly. "For your troubles."

The Underworld messenger bows, and the flames leap up in the tray. In an instant, the paper money burns to ashes. With a swipe of his sleeve, the messenger cleans away all of the ashes, and says contentedly, "This humble servant must take his leave."

The white paper lantern flickers, and the Underworld messenger disperses like the wind; but it doesn't forget to politely lock the window and shut the curtains.

The Ghost Slayer, the Four Mystical Artefacts, a demon beast... and the 'master' behind all this. Zhao Yunlan lies in bed struggling to fall asleep; he forgets about being upset from the rejection and entertains a million speculations of causes and effects. The night darkens and his thoughts deepen; he suddenly has a sense of foreboding.

Zhao Yunlan is wide awake all night; later he feels unwell again and takes another round of medicine. With his bad lifestyle, he has accumulated a lot of health problems, like chronic gastritis and an ulcer, and he's used to them bothering him once in a while.

Hence when the doorbell shrills at seven o'clock in the morning, Zhao Yunlan is so sleep deprived, he's like a rabid dog.

A rabid dog, as its name suggests, is insane; it'll bite anyone. Zhao Yunlan struggles to get out of bed, joints cracking, his whole body sore. He stumbles painfully forward, clutching at his stomach,



already imagining how he'll torture whoever is bothering him in a thousand gruesome ways.

But when he opens the door, he sees Shen Wei carrying some big bags.

Zhao Yunlan is mesmerised for two seconds, and then quickly tries to drop the mad-dog look and replace it with a smile as bright as a new spring. But since his brain isn't functioning properly, his expression is awkwardly trapped between 'eating you alive' and 'happy new year'; it's difficult to describe...

But if it must be put into words, perhaps it can be said that he looks like the New Year Monster.<sup>42</sup>

## Chapter 25

Shen Wei touches a hand to Zhao Yunlan's forehead. "You have a bit of a fever, what are you doing standing there? Get into bed and cover yourself with the blanket."

Only then does Zhao Yunlan realise that his head is a little heavy, and he lets Shen Wei hurry him into the bedroom.

Shen Wei pours him some warm water and puts stomach meds and anti-inflammatories by his bedside. Softly, he says, "Take these and go back to sleep; don't mind me, I'll make you something to eat."

Zhao Yunlan thinks: if a tasty sheep entered a wolf's lair, would the wolf go to sleep?

That wolf would have to be in a very sorry state.

But perhaps his fever is serious, or the medicine causes drowsiness; barely a minute later, Zhao Yunlan is asleep.

Shen Wei spends a long time unpacking everything he bought, and fills up the mostly empty refrigerator with food. He searches the kitchen, and finds out that there are ample cooking utensils; all brand new, still in their packaging, with price tags still attached.

Shen Wei takes out a clay pot, washes it, and prepares the ingredients. He starts them boiling, then turns down the heat, adds the seasoning and lets everything simmer slowly.

Shen Wei washes his hands, warms them on the heater, and softly walks into the room. Zhao Yunlan is fast asleep. An arm has slipped out from under the duvet, and Shen Wei gently tucks it back in.

He stands by the edge of the bed, quietly looking at Zhao Yunlan for a while. Then, he carefully reaches out and touches his hair; it's really soft, curling around Shen Wei's fingers. Shen Wei gently touches his face, but quickly pulls back. He lets out a deep breath, closes his eyes, and silently kisses his own fingers; for a moment, his expression is akin to worship.

Shen Wei doesn't know how he left Zhao Yunlan's apartment last night. He wandered through the streets aimlessly until he realised that his limbs were going numb. He's like a moth that has suddenly understood its fate, desperately trying to resist the temptation of the flame and caught in an agonising struggle between reason and instinct; he feels he'll soon die from the pain.

And still with all this suffering, he has only managed to resist for one night.

*He's sick, and nobody will take care of him, so I have to look after him... as a friend should,* Shen Wei tries to convince himself. But no-one knows better than himself what's really going on.

He laughs at himself mockingly, and picks up Zhao Yunlan's coat from the floor, folds it and puts it on the chair. He notices a pottery tray on the floor, which contains some residue from incense ash.

Shen Wei wipes off the ashes and rubs them in his hands. As they fall, the ashes turn pale white, like their remaining essence has been absorbed.

"A messenger from the Underworld?" He lifts his glasses, looks up at the tightly-closed curtains, and frowns, considering.

~~~

When Zhao Yunlan finally awakens from his deep slumber, the sun is already shining brightly through the curtains. He's soaked in sweat, and the heavy duvet sticks to him uncomfortably. His head feels

dizzy, and his nose slowly picks up on an unfamiliar aroma of food. Excited, he sits up quickly.

Shen Wei is sitting on the small couch nearby, quietly reading a back issue of some paranormal magazine. His head is lowered in concentration; he looks almost like a painting, his face unspeakably beautiful. Zhao Yunlan is lost for words, just stares at him dumbly.

Shen Wei must have heard him move; he looks up and smiles. "You're awake. Are you feeling better?"

Zhao Yunlan nods, still stunned; Shen Wei touches his forehead and finds that the fever is gone. It's good to be young, illness never lingers for long. "What about your stomach? Does it still hurt?"

Zhao Yunlan shakes his head. He notices his clothes have been tidied into a neat stack next to the bed. He reaches out to touch them; they're still warm from the heater.

"I turned on the heat in the bathroom; you've been sweating, go take a shower and get changed; I took the liberty of using your kitchen and made you something simple to eat."

Zhao Yunlan says nothing, takes his clothes and goes into the bathroom.

Zhao Yunlan has always lived a rough and careless life; this feels like a dream, and a fragile emotion is born inside him. He left home very early and got used to going out for food or ordering takeaway. He can't remember the last time he woke up to the smell of food and someone urging him to take a shower.

When he has finished showering and dressing, he realises with a shock that his chaotic apartment has been cleaned and tidied up. The perpetually-closed curtains are finally open and the windows thrown wide for some fresh air; it's a little cooler inside, and the entire apartment feels refreshed.

Zhao Yunlan pauses and for a miraculous moment, feels genuinely embarrassed. He walks to the kitchen just as Shen Wei shakes the water off those bamboo chopsticks he's never used before and puts them aside to dry. He opens the lid of the clay pot, testing the flavour with a small spoon. The strong and pleasant smell makes Zhao Yunlan realise he's quite hungry.

It's as if there were a string in his heart, and someone casually plucked it—gently, but the resonance echoes for days.

"I bought two theatre tickets for tonight. I was gonna take you to see a play after dinner," Zhao Yunlan suddenly says.

Shen Wei looks at him, turns off the stove, and takes two more dishes out of the kitchen, along with the rice and soup. "Help me carry that."

Zhao Yunlan saunters over and takes the food to the table, laughing. "But now you being here with me feels so great, I don't wanna go anymore."

"It's getting cold at night, so it's better not to leave the apartment anyway," Shen Wei agrees.

Zhao Yunlan sits down opposite Shen Wei, his eyes sparkling as he gazes at the Professor. "I'm not kidding, Shen Wei, if you'll have me, I'll sell this place tomorrow and buy a big place right next to your school."

Shen Wei doesn't make a sound.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "I've never thought of buying a house before, I found it burdensome, but now I understand the saying: if you want to get the girl, buy her a house of gold."

This is naked flirtation; Shen Wei stiffly avoids his gaze. "Eat, or the food will get cold."

Zhao Yunlan suddenly puts his hand on top of Shen Wei's. "I know I don't look like it, but I'm serious."

Shen Wei's hand is still cold, and Zhao Yunlan can't help but hold it even tighter, but Shen Wei suddenly shivers violently. He jerks his head up and his eyes aren't mild as usual, as if something has driven him into a frenzy. To Zhao Yunlan, they even seem a little aggressive. Shen Wei stares at him for a beat and snatches his hand away; he lowers his voice. "You should marry a woman and have children. You're still young; don't be so inconsiderate of the laws of nature and human decency."

Zhao Yunlan is startled by this unexpected lesson in duty and responsibility. "What the hell are these laws of nature and human decency?"

"If you're involved with a man, how will you explain it to your parents? If you don't have children, who will take care of you when you get old?"

"Explain what?" Zhao Yunlan asks incredulously. "To whom? I'm not responsible for procreating and perpetuating the human race, Professor Shen; are you... are you an alien?"

Shen Wei realises he cannot communicate with Zhao Yunlan and his self-deceiving excuses; he stops speaking and eats in silence.

Zhao Yunlan studies Shen Wei; he cannot believe such a pleasant beauty has turned out to be an old-fashioned pedant. Dejectedly, he gobbles down half a bowl of soup. Then he says tentatively, "When it comes to children, you can't know for sure: even if you get married, you might not be able to have kids; even if you have kids, you might not be able to raise them, and even if you raise them, you can't always expect them to take care of you when you're old. I'd rather

invest in A-shares. Besides, if you really want kids, surrogacy is always an option. As long as you have the money, it's very easy these days to get a kid or two."

Shen Wei chooses to ignore him.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "In life, if something makes you sad, it's good to think about it a bit more to avoid repeating the same mistakes. But if something makes you happy, you ought to think less, otherwise you'll ruin your mood. If it was the end of the world today, and you'd never done what your heart truly desires, wouldn't that be a shame?"

After a moment, Shen Wei says, "Things rarely go the way you want in this world."

"Right," Zhao Yunlan says. "Other people already mistreat you, and you would mistreat yourself too on top of that? Then what's the fun in living?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

Zhao Yunlan notices Shen Wei's tone softening, and relaxes, stretching his legs. While the going is good, he asks, "So will you come watch a movie with me next weekend?"

Shen Wei hesitates, but shakes his head eventually.

Zhao Yunlan is a bit disheartened.

Shen Wei cannot bear to see his expression like this, and explains, "I need to take the students on a field trip on Wednesday; I'm substituting for one of my colleagues."

Oh? There's a chance, Zhao Yunlan can clearly feel it; there's a small gap in Shen Wei's tightly shut door.

"Where? For how long?"

Shen Wei ignores the first question. "Around a week."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't follow up; if Shen Wei won't tell him, he'll figure it out by himself.

In a better mood, he finishes his rice. In the afternoon, Zhao Yunlan coaxes and pesters and uses all sorts of tricks on Shen Wei. He takes out all the old movies in his collection, turns on his home cinema for the very first time, and forces Shen Wei to stay until dinnertime.

If possible, Zhao Yunlan would've kept him even longer, but he can clearly feel that the darker it gets, the more Shen Wei tenses up. As a long-term planner, Zhao Yunlan decides to be careful with such a delicate situation; he doesn't want to scare Shen Wei. He resists the temptation and lets him go, for now.

After all, he'll still have a lot of chances in the future.

Chapter 26

It's Monday morning and the office is filled with the scent of breakfast. Zhu Hong has brought three pounds of buns from the canteen, deliciously big and juicy with lots of different stuffings. The mouthwatering smell wafts through the office and attracts all the late-comers who were prepared to make do with dry bread and crackers; even Chief Zhao, who normally hides in his office across the hall, has been seduced to come out.

Zhao Yunlan has long forgotten what Professor Shen told him about avoiding smoking, drinking and eating greasy food. He scarfs down a meat bun in two bites and knocks Guo Changcheng on the head. "Hey kid, turn on the TV."

Guo Changcheng shuffles off eagerly; Zhu Hong looks at him from behind and says smugly, "Xiao Guo is quite nice, hardworking and considerate, but he's just too timid; even now he still only dares to eat what I give him."

"That's normal," Zhao Yunlan says. "He's afraid of people."

Zhu Hong wants to nod, but realises something odd.

Zhao Yunlan adds kindly, "He isn't afraid of you, which means he doesn't treat you as human."

Zhu Hong ignores him.

She catches sight of Da Qing, who is at that moment leaping up onto the desk. He observes intently, and when Zhao Yunlan is about to stuff the next bun into his mouth, snatches it precisely with his claws; the accurate timing and agile movements make you forget how fat this cat is.

Da Qing bravely leaps off the desk, bites on the bun mid-air, and nimbly does a backflip to land on the ground. Then he shakes his butt and catwalks away.

The startled Chief is left with grease dripping down his face.

"Fuck this cat!"

"You deserve it," says Zhu Hong.

The television is showing the morning news, and it's about last night's earthquake. It could be felt in a few areas, but didn't have much impact. The epicentre was in a sparsely populated, remote mountain area, so there was no great damage to persons or property.

Zhao Yunlan mutters, "Why wasn't it stronger; I could have offered him a hug to reassure him."

Lin Jing, who knows the inside story, smiles mysteriously.

Zhu Hong looks at him, and asks Zhao Yunlan, "Who did you hook up with this time?"

"Don't use such a lewd term; this marvellous world needs love. You nasty people shouldn't insult pure love."

Lin Jing says, "May Buddha have mercy on your soul."

Zhu Hong says, "Send help."

Zhao Yunlan tries to pull her hair with his greasy hands, and she screams and dodges. Chu Shuzhi steps back to avoid drama, but when he looks up he's astonished. "Wang Zheng? Why are you here during the day?"

Everyone is startled, and Zhu Hong jumps up. "The curtains! Quick, close the curtains!"

Guo Changcheng and Lin Jing scramble towards the windows and draw all the curtains; the office has two layers of curtains and one of them is UV-proof. The room is instantly pitch-black; it's impossible to tell whether it's day or night out. Da Qing, having finished his meat bun, pounces up against the wall and turns on the light by kicking the switch with his fat little paws.

By now, Wang Zheng's face is so pale it's almost translucent. She waits until the curtains are fully closed before she floats across the room, feebly curling up on a chair. She looks frail enough to just dissipate entirely.

Lin Jing takes out some incense, lights it up and holds it under her nose. "Quick, inhale this."

The incense has been burning for a while before Wang Zheng recovers; she sighs and her body is looking a little less transparent.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zhao Yunlan mercilessly smacks her on the head; he can actually touch ghosts, and Wang Zheng leans away from him on the chair. "You wanna die again? How about I take you out sunbathing?"

Guo Changcheng trembles; he's never seen the Chief get angry before.

Wang Zheng shoots Zhao Yunlan a meaningful look and points to the TV.

The news is showing a rescue team and reporters at a village that has been affected by the earthquake, checking the damage.

The epicentre is in the Northwest, where the roads are poorly built and the population is scarce. Some areas deep in the mountains can

only be reached on foot. The camera shows a few small huts which may or may not be inhabited; half the roofs have collapsed.

A weathered stone plate reads *Clearstream Village*.

Wang Zheng has naturally big eyes, making her look slightly surprised all the time. Now they stare blankly at the sign. When the camera pans away, she softly says, "That's my..."

Guo Changcheng expects her to say 'home' or something similar; but Wang Zheng pauses and fixes her big eyes on Zhao Yunlan. "That's where I'm buried."

Her words bring a chill to the office.

"Chief Zhao, I want to take leave," Wang Zheng says in that ethereal but bland voice of hers. "I want to rest in peace."

Zhao Yunlan frowns and takes out a cigarette. "You..."

Wang Zheng leans backwards. "Don't make me breathe second-hand smoke."

"You're a ghost, Miss Zheng, you won't get lung cancer."

Wang Zheng says seriously, "Ghosts can smell cigarettes too. If you continue like this, you'll soon turn into human-shaped mosquito-repellant."

Zhao Yunlan sullenly stuffs the lighter back into his pocket. "You joined the Guardian Order, so you won't be able to reincarnate; even if you're interred, you wouldn't be at peace, so why do it? Besides, isn't burial uncommon where you're from?"

Wang Zheng stays silent, and lowers her head; after a while, she repeats, "I want to go home."

Zhao Yunlan sighs. "How do you plan on doing that?"

"I haven't thought about it yet."

"And so you decided to think about it in broad daylight?" Zhao Yunlan asks angrily.

Wang Zheng doesn't reply.

Zhao Yunlan is about to say something else, but then his mobile phone rings, and he leaves the room to take the call. When he returns, he wears an unconcealable smirk.

He coughs and raises his watch, saying to Wang Zheng, "How about this: you hide in here, and I'll let you back out when night falls. I'll figure something out... and when the time comes, I'll go there with you."

Without wasting time, Wang Zheng turns into a wisp of white mist and darts into his watch.

The others are all startled.

Chu Shuzhi asks, "Chief Zhao, you're so lazy that you always send someone else unless you absolutely have to go; what could make you want to go to the Northwest?"

"Fuck off, I take the lead all the time."

Lin Jing points out, "Amitabha, you never do anything unless it's in your personal interest."

Zhao Yunlan looks like he wants to say something, but he seems rather in demand: his phone rings again. He frowns, glares at his rebellious subordinates, and goes outside again to take the call. His face turns into a bright smile. "Hi, oh, my dear brother-in-law... say what? You're too kind, we don't have to be so formal, do we?"

Zhu Hong stares at him with a bun in her mouth, and asks curiously, "Brother-in-law? Since when?"

"That's Minister Song," says Da Qing, who's back on the table, sniffing at the delicious meat.

"Minister Song, who?"

"Bright Avenue is being reconstructed into a commercial area and we might have to move in one or two years. He has his eyes set on a small courtyard house in the city centre, near the University. But he needs connections for this." Da Qing licks his paws, more gossipy than the average cat.

"But how did that Minister Song become his brother-in-law? He doesn't even have siblings."

Da Qing snorts. "Who knows? Maybe after a good dozen drinking parties, he now has a lot of brothers-in-law out of nowhere."

~~~

Professor Shen finishes his morning lecture, and as the students are leaving, he tidies up his textbooks on the pulpit. The sun shines in and blinds him for a split second; he pauses, and as he looks down he sees a golden line in the air, coming in through the window and connecting to the pendant around his neck.

Shen Wei wants to snatch the line away, but his fingers pass right through it. The line moves as though it were alive. Then it splits into many lines, wrapping around his fingers, body and neck.

Shen Wei shuts his eyes; when he opens them again, the lines are gone.

He can't help but reach out and hold the glowing orb in his hand; he knows, now that he has met him, he won't be able to avoid him

anymore.

Zhao Yunlan's warm hand has upended his world. A day has passed, yet the warmth remains on the back of Shen Wei's hand... so hot, it's like burning.

Better... avoid him for a while longer.

~~~

Zhao Yunlan leaves the office early in the morning and there's no trace of him all day. He only calls the office late at night when it's almost closing time. In the absence of their chief, Lin Jing and Zhu Hong are long gone, Da Qing is sleeping behind a ventilation outlet of a computer, dead to the world, and Chu Shuzhi is still wearing the same stony expression, playing minesweeper without regard for anyone else.

Guo Changcheng takes the call. "Hello?"

"Xiao Guo?" Zhao Yunlan asks. "Are you busy? If not, help me with something."

"Okay, please tell me?"

"The revealing mirror... I mean, my wristwatch, it's too uncomfortable inside. Wang Zheng can't stay in there for long. I'm going to take her away in a couple of days, so we need to find something else as a carrier. Go online to buy a human doll, a big one. Best if it can stand and move. Try to find a local store; tell them it's urgent and ask for one-day delivery."

Guo Changcheng nods, the phone wedged between his shoulder and his ear, and searches online. "Chief Zhao, I found one: it's human-size, the joints are movable, and it can stand..."

Zhao Yunlan seems to have something urgent going on and interrupts him. "Right, that sounds good, buy that one; tell them to deliver it quickly."

Guo Changcheng is about to click 'purchase' when he notices the name of the shop and is shocked as if by lightning; it's a sex shop.

The pure little geek blushes instantly, and stammers into the phone, "Chief... Chief Zhao... this... this is a bit..."

"What? It's okay if it's expensive, ask for a receipt and you'll get full reimbursement... I'm hanging up, I've got work here; buy it ASAP!"

Zhao Yunlan hangs up without another word.

Guo Changcheng stares mutely at the computer screen. His balls start hurting.

Chapter 27

On the day of the trip, Zhao Yunlan's face is stiff as a death mask until they arrive at the airport.

~~~

When that human doll arrived at No. 4 Bright Avenue, even the delivery boy on his way out could hear Zhao Yunlan's furious roar.

"Guo Changcheng, do you have a portable toilet for a brain!?"

Guo Changcheng was so shocked at the change in 'kind' Chief Zhao's demeanour, his brain went on hold.

Da Qing curiously pawed the human doll, triggering some sort of switch; the doll let out a very realistic - and indecent - moan.

Da Qing jumped, and Zhao Yunlan's face turned blue; he pointed at the doll, unable to form words for half a minute.

Guo Changcheng cowered meekly against the wall like a petrified little mouse.

With difficulty, Zhao Yunlan swallowed down his anger and said weakly to Zhu Hong, "Can you... find some clothes for it...?"

He realised that this didn't make it right, but before he could come up with anything better, the phone he'd left in his office pinged with a new message. "Fuck this," he mumbled, bashing the door open and stomping outside.

Zhu Hong turned to Guo Changcheng. "You pissed the Ghost Terror<sup>43</sup> off so much that he's unable to speak? Good job."

Guo Changcheng was equally unable to speak, but surprisingly, he understood what Zhu Hong meant with 'Ghost Terror'.

Lin Jing patted him on the shoulder. "I just realised, Xiao Guo, you're a real brave man!"

Guo Changcheng was on the verge of tears.

Chu Shuzhi silently picked up Da Qing and covered the cat's eyes. With his usual expression of contempt and indifference, he turned away from these indecent things.

When it was time to go, Zhu Hong had turned up an enormous duffle bag and stuffed the doll inside. Staring off into space, she said, "Hang in there and stay in the revealing mirror for a while longer. You can come out when the plane has landed."

A cloud of white mist flew out of Zhao Yunlan's wristwatch, spiralled around Zhu Hong, and finally stopped in front of her, revealing the faint figure of a young girl. She was visibly worn out — clearly it was uncomfortable for a ghost to be so close to Zhao Yunlan.

"Just pretend I passed out on the plane," Wang Zheng said quietly, and looked at her future body with condemnation.

Guo Changcheng didn't dare look up.

~~~

Eventually, the whole criminal investigations team of No. 4 Bright Avenue have shamelessly come along on the trip. Bored to death with no work to do, they're determined to find out what made Zhao Yunlan's lazy ass leave his office.

But nobody dares to irritate the pissed-off Chief on the trip. Da Qing has even transformed into a cat-shaped pendant and is quietly

hanging on Zhu Hong's phone like a charm. The Chief looks like he wants to hijack the plane.

Until... they run into Shen Wei and his students at the airport.

The team looks on blankly as Chief Zhao's stormy expression turns into blue skies instantly, his cold glare melts, and the black cloud that has been hanging over him evaporates.

Without hesitation, he abandons his colleagues and strides towards the man surrounded by students, pretending that this encounter wasn't meticulously planned. "Shen Wei, what a coincidence!"

Shen Wei's eyes spark, but Zhao Yunlan can't tell if it's with pleasant surprise or unpleasant shock. An uncomfortable pause later, Shen Wei nods, adjusting his glasses. "Officer Zhao."

Zhu Hong watches them and realisation dawns.

In the sheltered crowd of students and their teacher, Zhao Yunlan quickly takes control. Before Shen Wei can say anything, his little flock has already divulged their destination and the details of their project to Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan smiles and says, "It takes way more than ten hours to get to Clearstream Village; how do you guys plan to go there?"

Shen Wei instantly knows he has an ulterior motive, but the students are too gullible. Before he can speak, the class captain answers, "We'll take the bus!"

Shen Wei suffers in silence.

"I know which bus you mean. It only makes one trip per day and leaves at six a.m.; it doesn't even take you directly to Clearstream Village." Zhao Yunlan seizes his chance, waiting for her to take the bait.

The class captain hesitates. "I checked the map; we could get off midway and it shouldn't take long to walk..."

"For your small physiques, I guess it'll take around five hours." Zhao Yunlan leans backwards, checking Shen Wei from the corner of his eye. "There are mountains towards the west. The map doesn't show you how rugged those mountain ranges can be; you might need to detour several times. And when I say five hours, that's assuming you don't get lost. It'll be nighttime when you get off the bus, so you'll probably have to camp out. It's been really cold recently; can you imagine sleeping in the snow..."

As expected, the students start to discuss frantically.

Zhao Yunlan finds Shen Wei half-smiling at him, and he's slightly embarrassed that his plan has been uncovered. He rubs his nose and coughs. "All right, calm down guys, how about this: I have a few friends out there who can rent us some cars, and we can go together. What do you think?"

The class captain says, "That... that's too troublesome for you, isn't it?"

Zhao Yunlan waves it off and takes out his phone; he wraps his arm around Shen Wei's shoulders and winks at the class captain. "How can it be troublesome? My relationship with your teacher is—"

Shen Wei turns his head and stares at him blandly. "What relationship?"

Zhao Yunlan is stuck, held fast by Shen Wei's gaze. This question... if he understates it, he's ruining his own plans, but if he overstates it, he'll come across as shameless. He hesitates before saying, "Neighbours! Remember, kids, treat your neighbours kindly and they might be closer to you than your relatives. Isn't that right, Professor Shen?"

Shen Wei gives him a helpless smile, and the cunning Chief Zhao is instantly stunned by it.

"Thanks," Zhao Yunlan hears him say.

"What are you thanking me for?" Zhao Yunlan straightens and says solicitously, "Oh right, you guys probably haven't eaten yet. Wait here."

Shen Wei tries to stop him, but Zhao Yunlan is already walking away.

Shortly, Zhao Yunlan comes back, carrying several large plastic bags. Fortunately, he hasn't gone completely brain-dead; he stuffs two in Guo Changcheng's hand on the way.

"Oh, wow," Chu Shuzhi says, "I thought he'd already forgotten about us."

Lin Jing apologises to his fried chicken leg, as usual. "Amitabha, forgive me." Then this fake monk starts tearing into the chicken leg and washes it down with coke.

The food in Guo Changcheng's hands has quickly been divided among the group, and just as he's standing there like an idiot, someone hands him a hamburger.

It's Zhu Hong. She isn't looking at him, but at Zhao Yunlan... who says something, and the crowd laughs; it seems this guy is always the centre of attention wherever he goes.

Guo Changcheng says, "Thanks—"

"No problem," Zhu Hong interrupts him. "Who's that guy?"

Guo Changcheng realises she's talking about Shen Wei. "That's a Professor from Dragon City University. Last time during the hungry

ghost case, when Chief Zhao wasn't there, he helped us fight off the ghost; but the Chief says he won't remember that incident."

Zhu Hong studies him and mumbles, "He's a Professor already? He looks very young... but he can't be that young if he's a Professor? He'd be married with kids, right?"

Guo Changcheng scratches his head. "How would I know?"

Zhu Hong glances at him and then back at Zhao Yunlan. Shen Wei picks up a chicken nugget and Zhao Yunlan instantly opens the sauce pack and hands it to him. His eyes are tender like still water, and he seems like a completely different person from this morning's grumpy Chief who did nothing but shout at them and slam doors.

"Okay, seems like he's single." Zhu Hong keeps observing for a while and concludes, "That jerk is shameless as hell, but he never hits on anyone who's married... oh gods, get a room!"

Zhu Hong and Guo Changcheng are both watching as Zhao Yunlan's phone rings again like a hotline. He holds his drink in one hand, takes out his phone with the other, and bites at a French fry in Shen Wei's hand all in one lightning-fast move.

He gobbles it down and licks his lips while looking at Shen Wei; the Professor awkwardly retracts his empty fingers.

Guo Changcheng's expression turns from dumb to astonished.

And so the entire SIU team are abandoned by their Chief for the whole three-hour flight: Zhao Yunlan uses the excuse of "wanting to listen to Professor Shen talk to the students about Clearstream Village" to switch to a seat near Shen Wei.

Finally, the plane lands and they arrive at the city nearest to their destination.

Just after leaving the airport, before they even have time to realise how cold it is at high altitude, a fat, cowardly-looking middle-aged man in a bulky fur coat climbs out of one jeep in a row of many; he holds up a sign that says 'Chief Zhao' and cranes his neck, searching.

Zhao Yunlan leads the two groups over there; when the fat guy sees him, he's hesitant at first, but he soon smiles in realisation and greets Zhao Yunlan warmly. "Chief Zhao! It's you, isn't it? I see how smart you look and I know you're definitely the Chief."

"Oh, no, don't call me Chief." Zhao Yunlan offers a handshake with both hands, "We don't know our way around here; luckily we've got you, Lang-ge, we'll feel much safer."

Mr Lang shakes his hands vigorously. "Xie Yuanming called me and told me to send some cars; I said how could that be appropriate? Xie-ge is one of my best friends, and his friend is also my friend, of course I had to come in person!"

Zhao Yunlan pretends to be surprised. "Oh really? You're such good friends with Xie-ge?"

Mr Lang says, "Of course, we swore to brotherhood when we went drinking one time."

Zhao Yunlan points a finger at him, looking serious. "Well this is your fault then! Xie-ge's brother is my brother, and what did you call me just now? How can we be so formal?"

Mr Lang looks blank for a second, then finds his feet and smiles. "Of course, my bad... that's great, now I can tell people I have a brother who's a Police Chief from Dragon City, what an honour! Come on, let's get you settled! And no more of those unbecoming formalities!"

The two keep going back and forth, and nobody else has a chance to say anything.

Shen Wei's students just exchange glances.

Zhu Hong follows them and whispers to Da Qing, who's still hanging on her phone, "Right, now I understand how Minister Song became his brother-in-law."

Chapter 28

Shen Wei and his group are all puzzled as Zhao Yunlan pulls them along with his friend Mr Lang, who treats them to a lavish meal and has them stay at the only local five-star hotel.

The next morning, with the sky still gloomy, three jeeps arrive at the entrance of the hotel. In the back of the jeeps are winter clothes, outdoor gear, high energy foods and first aid kits, all new and in their packaging. They have everything a professional research team would need.

Zhao Yunlan is fairly relaxed and shows no qualms accepting the gifts at all. He tells Lin Jing to give each of the chauffeurs a cigarette and goes to have a good chat with his friend Mr Lang, who has come to see them off.

Mr Lang is brimming with enthusiasm, despite the fact that he and Zhao Yunlan finished off three bottles of spirits last night. He doesn't seem to feel the effects of all the alcohol and is in good shape this early in the morning – only his face is a little puffed up, giving him a slightly pig-faced look.

He pats Zhao Yunlan vigorously on the shoulder with his bear paw. "Off you go, old pal. I haven't treated you well enough, please understand, this place is so small, don't be offended."

Zhao Yunlan glares at him. "You're getting formal with me again? We've descended on your village and abused your hospitality. Of course you've made us feel welcome! Lang-ge, if you visit Dragon City in the future, I'll return the favour. I'll spare no expenses, we'll take our cars with the special licence plates, and I'll accompany you everywhere. We can call Xie-ge too, and the three of us'll have a great time."

They bid each other farewell, and Zhao Yunlan turns around to Shen Wei. "The drive through the mountains isn't easy, and the kids have poor skills; I'm worried. How about Lin Jing, Zhu Hong and I each drive a car, and we separate the students into groups? What do you think?"

Even a paid tour guide wouldn't be so diligent and considerate. If Shen Wei rejected him, that would seem a bit insensitive.

But Shen Wei isn't as shameless as Zhao Yunlan; he's rather embarrassed about how well they've been treated. He looks very apologetic as they all get into their cars. "I didn't plan ahead for the trip, and I really troubled you. Besides, I don't even know Mr Lang, and this must have cost him a great deal; do you think we should send him something after this..."

Zhao Yunlan waves his hand generously. "No, don't worry about it, you don't owe him anything. I'm going to pay for all of this, and you don't have to thank me."

Shen Wei is speechless.

~~~

They stop at a red light, and Zhao Yunlan turns aside and smiles at Shen Wei, revealing dimples. Shen Wei's face flushes and he glances at the students behind them. They're both excitedly looking out of the window, so Shen Wei relaxes a little.

Zhao Yunlan's heart quivers, and he decides to go one further. He reaches out and adjusts Shen Wei's shirt collar a little. Then, as if unintentionally, he touches Shen Wei's ear as well. Shen Wei has yet to react when he withdraws his hand.

"Your collar was flipped." He fixes the rear-view mirror, and looks forward as if nothing happened.

This time Shen Wei's ears are bright red.

The lights turn green. Zhao Yunlan steps on the accelerator and concentrates on driving, but his mouth curves up suspiciously.

Shen Wei looks out of the window as if bashful - at least that is Zhao Yunlan's interpretation. He's just guessing since he cannot see Shen Wei's face.

The redness gradually wears away, and Shen Wei turns pale. He always seems to be frowning, a line deepening between his brows. Every now and then, his gentle face shows some coldness, solitary and distant.

Driving in the mountains is exhausting: the roads are bumpy and dizzying. After six or seven hours, the students are all asleep. Shen Wei doesn't dare close his eyes; he needs to keep an eye on the driver, lest he fall asleep... especially a driver who drank so much last night.

As they move on, the roads get narrower and rougher, with more hairpin bends. The cliff edge is only about a metre away from the wheels, and there's not even a guardrail, just a sheer drop for the careless.

Luckily, the cars are high quality, and although Zhao Yunlan looks the unreliable type, his driving is steady.

The temperature drops as they get farther up into the mountains, so that they feel it despite the air conditioning. A thick layer of snow covers the roads. Fewer and fewer people can be seen along the way, and the snow is starting to form icy ruts on the road. They have to be more vigilant, and the gap between the three cars begins to widen.

Zhao Yunlan slows down, then carefully brings the car to a halt; the other two follow suit.

"The roads ahead are getting tougher. I think we should put on snow chains." Zhao Yunlan opens the door and says to Shen Wei, "It's cold outside, stay in the car."

Shen Wei ignores him, and jumps out to help. Not only is it bitterly cold, but the wind is howling; not even a thick down jacket could protect you from this chilling gale, let alone Zhao Yunlan's fashionable coat.

The two students in the back seat wake up and come out to help as well. Zhao Yunlan urges them to get back inside. "I don't need your help, get back inside, you've only just woken up. Catching a cold out here is not to be trifled with."

The two men quickly chain up the tires, feeling like their fingers are about to freeze. Zhao Yunlan straightens up and looks into the distance, at the magnificent mountain range with its glaciers and snowy peaks. For a moment, he feels like he can see mountains and rivers touching the clouds and merging with the pale sky.

They get back inside, and Zhao Yunlan makes a phone call to each of the other two cars. He reminds them of snow and ice driving safety precautions and stresses, "We're entering a glacier area; stay quiet and don't honk without reason, unless you want to call down an avalanche and eradicate our whole day shift team."

The mountains around them are completely covered with snow and ice. The sun begins to drift westward and the sky grows dimmer and dimmer. Then dusk falls, the wheel tracks fade, and a desolate cold begins to rise.

The distant glaciers are getting closer, their shapes becoming more and more obscure. Only one angled summit reflects cold light from somewhere, until that winks out too.

Zhao Yunlan has turned on the headlights. The idle chatter between him and Shen Wei has stopped at some point, since Shen Wei doesn't dare distract him. The car moves slowly, the chained tires treading precariously through layers of snowfall. An endless cliff is facing them, and in the sheer whiteness there's nothing much to see other than the occasional grey-brown rock.

The snowy mountainscape is awe-inspiring<sup>44</sup>. The students in the back hardly dare breathe.

The sky is now completely dark.

The two students sitting behind them are a girl in red clothes—the class captain—and a bespectacled boy. The boy quietly asks Shen Wei, "Professor, will we make it out of the mountains tonight? Will we find a place to stay?"

Before Shen Wei can answer, Zhao Yunlan beats him to it. "Don't worry, Clearstream Village is nearby, we're almost there, but..."

A light shining into his eyes interrupts him. He frowns and carefully stops the car.

The class captain asks nervously, "What's wrong? Is it the car?"

Shen Wei waves her question aside. "The car is fine; there is a light ahead. You stay here, I will take a look."

Zhao Yunlan asks, "You see it too?"

They exchange a grave look.

The girl senses the weird atmosphere. "Is... is it a street light?"

"There are no street lights around here." Zhao Yunlan turns around. "You stay in your seats. There's chocolate and beef jerky, have some

if you're hungry."

That said, he opens the door and gets out, Shen Wei in his wake.

The wind has stopped at some point, but the temperature keeps dropping. The air isn't the pure cold of snow and ice, but the kind of wet cold that sinks into your bones and freezes you to the core. It's utterly quiet – not even the sound of a breeze or of snowfall. Subconsciously, they keep their footsteps light as they move forward.

The shining light is also cold, flickering occasionally, like someone carrying a lantern. It's reminiscent of ancient funerals with their white paper lanterns, and it seems to be moving closer.

Zhao Yunlan's eyes widen. He quickly opens the door and shoves Shen Wei back into the car. To the other two cars he gestures, 'Stay in the car and don't come out', then he swiftly gets inside too and locks the doors.

The light is getting even closer now, and a few silhouettes become visible. Zhao Yunlan turns around and says to the two students, "No matter what you see, don't say a word. Don't stick your face against the window and don't make any sound."

The side windows are fogged up; only the windshield, cleaned by the wipers, offers a clear view. Approaching them is a crowd led by someone holding a lantern, all slowly walking towards the cars. They're men and women, young and old, but all of them look ragged and miserable, as though they're escaping from a disaster.

So many people... why would they be walking there?

"Who are those people?" the class captain asks in a tremulous whisper.

"They're not people." Zhao Yunlan lowers his voice. "They're ghost soldiers."

The girl covers her mouth, and she can see the faces of the people: they're dull-eyed, with terrible wounds. The most bizarre is the figure leading the way with a paper lantern; he... or she... doesn't have a face. They wear a very tall hat which covers their head all the way down to their chin. The figure is snow white, like it's made of paper paste.

Its legs and shoulders are motionless, its body stiff – it looks like it floats in the wind like a dying kite.

It doesn't look at the road but straight at Zhao Yunlan's car. In the split second it walks past the misted-up car window, the girl sees its paper body bow twice towards them, and Zhao Yunlan nods in response. The figure floats on and the group follows, moving along the mountain path.

When the strange group is out of sight, Zhao Yunlan gets out of the car and takes a torch out of the back. "Something might have happened over there," he says to Shen Wei. "I'll go take a look, you keep an eye on the children."

Shen Wei can't help but frown.

Zhao Yunlan takes his hand. It's so cold that it immediately absorbs his warmth, making Zhao Yunlan feel tender and protective.

"Don't frown," he says. "Everything will be fine."

## Chapter 29

The wind begins howling again, and the temperature plummets. Snow whipped up from the ground hits their faces like tiny knives.

Zhao Yunlan's slender figure disappears in the whirling wind and discoloured world, his torchlight as weak as a firefly.

Twenty minutes later, he still hasn't returned, and Shen Wei can't sit still any longer.

"Don't move, and don't get out of the car," he says to the students. "Hand me the torch; I'll go look for him, it won't take long."

"Professor," the class captain says, worried, "could something have happened?"

Shen Wei pauses; in the dim light, his expression is concealed behind his glasses. He says in his regular, gentle voice, "No. I'm here, how could I let anything happen to him?"

He wraps his clothes around him tightly, pushes the door open, and strides off.

The class captain stands dumbfounded for a bit; then she says to the bespectacled boy, "That wasn't what I meant. I was asking whether something happened ahead, and whether our cars can keep moving."

Little Spectacles says, "...I know."

The two students stare at each other; in this horrifying moment, they feel they've realised something... well, something they really shouldn't know.



~~~

Coarse bird cries echo off the steep mountain walls. Shen Wei wipes his snow-covered lenses and looks ahead; he sees a bird amidst the endless snow.

It seems to be a crow, but much larger than regular ones. It has long, thin tail feathers and its blood-red eyes look straight at him. It doesn't seem frightened at all, just interested in Shen Wei.

With some difficulty, he takes a few steps forward. Initially the crow looks at him quietly, but then it tilts its head and screeches, beak pointing to the sky. Then it closes its eyes and bows down, beak almost touching the ground, as if mourning for something.

The gale whips up a veil of snow; Shen Wei feels like he's about to freeze, like his blood will stop flowing and solidify along with his nerve endings.

But his freezing nose miraculously still works and he's able to pick out a scent: it smells bad, but not overwhelmingly so. Something is decaying deep beneath the snow.

He stops abruptly, staring at the white patch of snow in front of him. A small mound like a molehill, bulging out just a little, darts about under the snow in the direction of the mountaintop.

Something is moving underground!

Shen Wei's mind goes blank; for an instant, he forgets who he is. His hand twitches, veins standing out on the back of it, and his dark eyes grow frighteningly fierce. Under his gaze, the snow boils like water, surging ever higher, and the things hidden underneath are about to emerge...

Just then, a voice comes from behind him. "Didn't I tell you to wait in the car? Why did you come out?"

Shen Wei is startled; the blood-thirst in his eyes disappears at once and is replaced by confusion. Before he can turn around, his body is wrapped up in something warm. Whether Zhao Yunlan really doesn't mind the cold or is gritting his teeth to show off, he has wrapped his coat around Shen Wei, transferring his body warmth to him.

Zhao Yunlan's freezing face wears an exaggerated but warm smile. "You came for me?"

'Don't answer him, don't answer him!' a voice frantically screams in Shen Wei's mind, but as if under some compulsion, he nods.

Zhao Yunlan gives a low laugh and slings his arm around Shen Wei's shoulders, almost like an embrace. They're about the same height, so when walking they're constantly about to trip over each other. Zhao Yunlan simply clips his flashlight to his collar and takes Shen Wei's hand.

Shen Wei strains a bit, but Zhao Yunlan just grabs hold of him even tighter.

"Don't move around so much," Zhao Yunlan says softly in his ear. "Watch your step, it's slippery."

The bird ascends abruptly, circles around twice, then flies away into the distance.

"Don't look," Zhao Yunlan says. "That's an obituary bird. Old people will tell you crows that are particularly big and have long tails are obituary birds. They only appear when there's a big disaster, and they're a sign of bad luck."

He doesn't wait for Shen Wei's reply but frowns, giving him a meaningful glance. Pretending to be at a loss, he tries, "That's strange, how are your horoscope readings? Why do you always bump into these kinds of things?"

"What happened?" Shen Wei obviously doesn't want to dwell on this, and diverts his attention instead.

"Oh, I took a look." Zhao Yunlan swallows his suspicions and continues, "We probably have to find a place to stay the night. The road ahead is blocked, I suspect by an avalanche," he says while trying to open the car door; his hand is already frozen numb, his fingers have lost all their strength. He struggles to pull the handle, but fails.

Shen Wei opens the door for him. "Get in and warm up a little."

The heating in the car is making Zhao Yunlan dizzy; he frowns, rubbing his forehead, and takes a piece of chocolate that the girl hands him. "This road is around seven years old. It's off the beaten track, but it appeared in a travel magazine once, so tourists come here quite a lot. There are several villages around, providing simple bed and breakfast. But the road ahead is impassable, there's nothing to see but a vast snowfield now. I've spotted a few trees through my binoculars, buried in snow up to their branches, so I think there must have been an avalanche ahead..."

Spectacles asks hesitantly, "The ghosts just now, are they villagers who died in the avalanche? I've heard old men say that ghost soldiers like this also appeared after the big Tangshan earthquake of 1976."

Zhao Yunlan shakes his head, takes out his phone and makes a call. After exchanging terse greetings, he asks about geological disaster reports for the area. The others can't hear what he's being told, they only see his frown deepen the longer the call goes on.

"All right, thanks. It's fine, we can hang on for a night... yes, I know what to do." Zhao Yunlan hangs up. "We're in trouble."

"It's really an avalanche?"

"Yeah," Zhao Yunlan says, "it's just been on the evening news. A widespread disaster, seems like a few villages down there have been buried; the rescue teams are doing their best, but the chances of survival are slim."

The students are silenced.

After a while, the class captain asks, "Then... where do we stay tonight? In the car? Can we keep the aircon on all night? Do we have enough petrol?"

"We do, but an avalanche just struck, so it's not safe here. We should go on up to higher ground. Don't be afraid, I'll get you there. I saw a small hut at the mountaintop through my binoculars. It's probably uninhabited, but at least it has a roof." Now Zhao Yunlan has warmed up, he buttons his coat and gets out of the car. He takes a large bag of food and some warm clothes out of the jeep's boot and throws them to the others. "Put on the clothes and eat something; we'll take the rest of the food with us. I'll call the others behind us; pack your sleeping bags and tents. Little girl, you can just carry the food, I'll take your sleeping bag for you."

The others get a call from Zhao Yunlan, and everyone quickly gathers.

Shen Wei is very observant, and he realises that there seems to be an extra person in their group. That person follows at the rear and doesn't make a sound; judging from the physique, it's probably a woman. She's wrapped in very thick clothes and her face is obscured. She seems very odd; perhaps she's numb from the freezing cold, because her movements are very uncoordinated.

Zhu Hong sometimes talks to her, and she just nods or shakes her head. Shen Wei notices that when she moves her head, her legs stop moving; it's as if she can only move one part of her body at a time.

As he's puzzling over this, an arm wraps around his shoulders and the back of a hand presses against his face.

Shen Wei's skin is numb from the weather; it takes him a moment to notice the touch, but then he freezes. He can't dodge it, but he can't accept it either. Luckily, Zhao Yunlan only touches him briefly, and quickly moves his hand away, "Why are you so dreadfully cold?"

"I am not cold."

"Yes, you are, your lips are turning blue," Zhao Yunlan interrupts him. He takes off the weatherproof jacket he only just put on, and wraps it around Shen Wei without further ado.

Startled, Shen Wei grabs his hand. "What are you doing? You said it yourself: catching a cold out here is not to be trifled with."

Zhao Yunlan pulls the collar of his shirt open a little. "I have thermal underwear. Even if we stayed with villagers at the foot of the mountain there'd be no central heating. I came prepared, while you just rushed into this. Now put it on!"

Still Shen Wei refuses.

Zhao Yunlan softens his voice. "Come on, don't make me worry about you."

His tone and his gaze are really too much for Shen Wei; he almost bolts.

Zhao Yunlan wraps the jacket around him even tighter and walks back. "Watch your steps; hold on to each other and don't let go. Xiao Guo, can't you see Zhu Hong needs help with her suitcase, don't you have eyes?"

Chief Zhao's fury still lingers, so Guo Changcheng scurries back to take Zhu Hong's suitcase.

Shen Wei stares after Zhao Yunlan, rubbing his cheek wistfully where a bit of Zhao Yunlan's body warmth still remains. He zips up the jacket and touches his pendant. He feels the sphere faintly glowing with heat, unmistakable amongst the snow and ice.

So faint, and yet so comforting.

They walk for about half an hour before they can finally make out the hut that Zhao Yunlan mentioned. Another half an hour, and they arrive.

The hut is built from stones, with wooden pillars and a cowhide roof to block out wind and snow. It's surrounded by a small courtyard with a rickety fence which is almost buried in the snow. Lonely and battered, it stands at the mountaintop amidst the empty wilderness; scarily quiet.

As Zhao Yunlan pushes open the wooden gate of the fence, Da Qing suddenly pounces forward from Zhu Hong's phone and before anyone can wonder where the cat has suddenly come from, he screeches, his fur standing up.

Zhao Yunlan picks him up, smooths his fur and asks softly, "What's wrong?"

Da Qing only glares at the snow-laden courtyard when a voice comes from behind.

"Chief Zhao," Wang Zheng says, soft as a sigh, "Da Qing wants to tell you something's buried in the courtyard."

Chapter 30

Wang Zheng's voice is actually quite pleasant. If she were still a living human, she could become a singer and participate in contests. But she's a ghost now, so her voice has deteriorated, and she speaks with a feeble and airy tone that gives you goosebumps and sends shivers down your spine.

When she suddenly speaks, she startles the crowd. Shen Wei's students all stare at her. Wang Zheng would rather hide, but she's not used to this body, so she can't get away and has no choice but to endure everyone's attention.

Zhao Yunlan rubs the hand holding the flashlight on his coat to feel warmer. "You guys wait here; I'll go take a look."

With that, he pushes the gate open and enters the courtyard. Shen Wei follows without hesitation.

The ground is frozen and full of potholes, and Zhao Yunlan walks around it carefully. The black cat's eyes are like two small lanterns in the darkness, shining with a ghostly light. Suddenly, he jumps out of Zhao Yunlan's arms and rushes toward a corner, where he starts clawing at a small mound with his fat paws.

Zhao Yunlan squats down, picks him up by the neck and wipes his paws on his sleeve absently. He shines his torch into the corner and brushes away the dirt Da Qing has loosened.

He can only make out something ivory white. After some consideration, he pulls a small shovel from his bag. He jabs at the hard soil, digging down until he can make out a flat forehead and half an eye socket. He's dug up half a skull!

Shen Wei, who has been watching him dig in silence, turns and sweeps his gaze over the courtyard. Seeing many similar mounds scattered across the area, he has a chilling thought: the two of them are standing on a mass grave.

He turns back and sees the students gawking by the gate, frightened but curious. He stills Zhao Yunlan's arm and says, "Bury it again, don't tell the others."

Zhao Yunlan does as he's told and stands up as if nothing happened. He invites the students and the others inside. "It's nothing, just some tile fragments. Watch your step. Get into the hut, set up your tents, and remember to keep yourselves warm." Zhao Yunlan puts away the shovel, lights a cigarette with shaking fingers, and watches the group enter the hut one by one.

Wang Zheng still hangs back. She stops next to Zhao Yunlan, and whispers so only he can hear, "You saw it, right? In fact, there's more than one layer."

Zhao Yunlan feels his scalp tingling; he lowers his voice. "Fuck me, I've never seen a burial site with several layers before; it's awfully crowded. If we stay here, will they complain to the authorities? Nothing we can do about that though; our cars can't get up here, and there's nowhere else to stay. If we let those tender blossoms camp outside, they'll freeze to death."

"Indeed, it's taboo to stay here." Wang Zheng hesitates. "I'll tell them later; as long as we do the rituals, staying for one night... shouldn't be a problem."

Zhao Yunlan nods and urges her, "Be quick."

Wang Zheng counts her steps as she walks outside. Then she takes two steps back, turns around, and kneels on the ground. With her hands above her head, she performs a full kowtow⁴⁵ towards the

courtyard. The students gawp; Shen Wei tells them to stay quiet and stand back... because he has realised: Wang Zheng's 'fingers' are plastic, and her 'hair' is made of nylon.

It seems that what's kneeling there isn't a real person, but a plastic mannequin from a shopping mall.

Of course Professor Shen is too pure to think of other possibilities.

Zhao Yunlan leans against the wall and watches Wang Zheng.

She's kneeling in the doorway, quietly muttering in some unknown language. The others don't understand, they can't even figure out how many syllables make a word. All they hear are notes flowing out of her mouth like water, echoing through the courtyard and seemingly awakening some ancient spirit, stirring something deep in their hearts.

Every single person in the hut feels it, even Shen Wei's students. The youngsters can't help but solemnly bow their heads... only Zhao Yunlan is still standing there smoking and looking indifferent.

Zhu Hong walks forward after Wang Zheng is done and softly asks, "What was that?"

"Ancestors' souls." Wang Zheng stands up and fastidiously wipes the dirt off her trousers. "I greeted them, so it should be fine now. Don't crowd up in front of the door, get inside, everyone. Remember, don't throw rubbish in the courtyard, say greetings when you go out, and if you need the toilet, walk farther away."

The snowstorm is howling, nobody wants to go outside and freeze. But today they've experienced so many incredible things that they're starting to be afraid of committing a taboo. After hearing what Wang Zheng has said, they hurry back into the hut with relief. It's simple and crude inside, but at least it shelters them from the wind.

When everyone is inside, Wang Zheng, still out in the courtyard, turns to Zhao Yunlan and says softly, "Chief Zhao, you've been able to 'see' from birth. You're born to be with things that people don't believe in, to know the existence of ghosts and gods. But when you pass by shrines or temples, you never show any sign of respect. I heard that you entered the Jokhang Temple⁴⁶ three times, which all worshippers dream to visit, but when you saw the golden Buddha you just nodded and didn't kneel. That's inappropriate."

Zhao Yunlan flicks some ashes onto the window sill without a care, and nods, smiling. "Yeah, too outrageous; not worth learning from and not worth advocating. The constitution recognises religious freedom, so we must maintain a certain respect for the faith of others..."

Wang Zheng glares at him with her plastic eyes as if they were real, and lowers her voice even more. "There's always something you don't know about in this world. Perhaps you're very capable, but you're just human. Can you be greater than heaven and earth? Greater than destiny? You can't be too arrogant. If you're crazy enough to disregard the gods, karma will get to you one day."

Zhao Yunlan's smile wears off a little. He looks at Wang Zheng and gently fixes up her messy clothes, but he says, coldly, "I regret nothing and wish for nothing. Be it gods, buddhas or demons, who has the right to judge me? Let them be great and powerful; how does it concern me?"

Wang Zheng looks at him for a long time, and sighs. She extends her plastic hand, mutters something while gesturing in the air, and gently touches Zhao Yunlan on the forehead with a finger.

"You're a good person," she says softly. "May Buddha have mercy, forgive you and protect you."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't dodge, he even lowers his head so that she can reach it. After Wang Zheng finishes, he asks, "You were also a good person when you were alive. Did Buddha forgive you and protect you?"

Wang Zheng looks up, and her plastic eyes show a hint of sadness.

Zhao Yunlan pats her shoulder gently. "It's stormy outside, young lady, let's get inside."

In the hut, Zhu Hong and Chu Shuzhi work together efficiently to set up the field stove. They fill a small cooking pot with snow and start boiling it. Zhu Hong builds a frame to soften some vacuum-sealed beef strips in the steam, then grills them on bamboo skewers over the open fire.

The students have already taken out their notebooks, and as soon as Wang Zheng enters, their eyes light up and they gather around her. A boy, tall and thin like a bamboo pole, says hesitantly, "Miss, would you mind if we asked you questions about the customs of this hilltop settlement?"

Then he glances at Shen Wei and realises that his professor is frowning. He frantically adds, "Sorry, I mean, only if it's appropriate! If there's any taboo we don't know about, please don't get mad."

Wang Zheng sits down beside the small stove, and says softly, "No problem."

Her wide sleeve covering her hand, she picks up one of the chocolate balls that someone stacked next to her. It's a small and beautifully wrapped treat. She really wants to try it, but she only plays with it and stares at it resignedly.

The class captain quickly picks up another one and hands it to Wang Zheng. "This is delicious, Miss, please try it."

"I'm just looking," she says softly. "I can't eat... sugar." After a pause, she says. "These mountain ranges have seen several geological changes over the years, and the people living down in the valley have had centuries of migration and integration. It's said that in the earliest days, a Khampa tribe⁴⁷ used to live here. Those Tibetans had a tradition of sky burial: after a person's death, the corpse was handed to the Sky Burial Master for disintegration. He chopped up the body and greased it with ghee to make it easy for the birds to eat. If a corpse wasn't fully cleaned by birds, it was considered very unlucky, so the job of the body-breaker was very important. This hut used to be that of the Sky Burial Master."

"Although the Sky Burial Master was greatly respected in the clan, he touched dead corpses all the time, so people usually wouldn't want close contact with him," Lin Jing explains.

As Guo Changcheng listens, he thinks of someone else... the Ghost Slayer.

Isn't he greatly respected but feared as well?

Apart from Zhao Yunlan, nobody dares to even talk to him; even the ghosts avoid him. It's as if... he brought terrible bad luck.

"Over the next centuries, many tribes settled here, mostly herdsmen and a few farmers. But there wasn't much fertile land, and inevitably, widespread conflicts broke out. Sometimes the tribes would go to war, and sometimes they would make relations by intermarriage, and their bloodlines began mixing. Soon, quite a few other tribes started performing sky burials, only they weren't quite the same as those of the Tibetans."

Wang Zheng lectures like a history teacher, talking in a soft, straightforward manner. It might make some people drowsy, but Shen Wei's students are used to this discipline; they eagerly rub their hands together, and frantically jot down notes.

Zhao Yunlan gobbles some jerky, drags his sleeping bag next to Shen Wei's to get a nice view, and starts napping.

Chapter 31

"Later, the climate in this region became more and more inhospitable." Wang Zheng adds a little water to the pot. "The population declined, as people moved to other settlements, and then around... hmmm, I'm not too sure, I guess around the Central Plains' Song and Yuan dynasties, there was a big disaster here, and most of the tribes were extinguished. Most people died or fled, and only a small group of Hanga were left, who'd found a way to hide in a cave."

The class captain asks, "Is any of this recorded in written history?"

Wang Zheng shakes her head. "In ancient times, these mountain ranges weren't part of the Central Plains, so Han civilization never reached these areas. It was very remote and had a small population, so news wasn't likely to come in or spread out. At best, the imperial government may have some geological or astronomical records, but they probably never knew the place was inhabited. There is some local folklore, though. They say that the snow came down from the mountains as demons with teeth and claws, and white creatures emerged from crevasses and waterways, grabbing humans and livestock to rip out their guts and tear off their heads."

The class captain ponders this and nods in understanding. "So it might have been a geological disaster, such as an avalanche caused by an earthquake."

Wang Zheng doesn't confirm or deny. "The Hanga people later moved deep into the mountains, somewhere near Clearstream Village. When you study the ethnic makeup of people in Clearstream Village, you'll find many of them bear similarities to the Hanga people. The Sky Burial Site was destroyed, but the Sky Burial Master's hut remained, and later became a lookout point for the

Hanga people to watch the mountain. Every month they would send a strong young man to keep watch for signs of disaster. Eventually, the watcher became the most respected person in the clan and this hut became his place of residence.

"In this way, the watch house became a sacred place for the Hanga people, and when the time came for important rituals, the whole clan would come up the mountain and gather round the watch house."

Little Spectacles asks, "Why haven't I heard of the Hanga people before?"

"Because their population was small, and they didn't intermarry with other tribes. They ceased to exist a long time ago, so nobody knows about them now."

The students finally understand, and the beanpole concludes, "Oh, I understand, it's tribal extinction caused by centuries of inbreeding."

Wang Zheng doesn't comment, but her soft laugh makes those closest to her wince.

Any normal person would find it difficult to talk to Wang Zheng: even though she doesn't say or do anything eerie, her very existence radiates eeriness.

Their curiosity satisfied, the students go to bed at Shen Wei's urging. Wang Zheng doesn't need sleep, and Da Qing is the most active at night, so the two stay awake, Da Qing on guard.

Shen Wei is the last to lie down. He checks the door and windows, and even uses some tape to seal all holes and gaps in the hut. He reminds the students to stay warm and asks Wang Zheng if she needs more clothes. He puts out the fire so the water won't boil over.

Only when all that is taken care of, he quietly gets into his sleeping bag.

Zhao Yunlan fell asleep quite a while ago, while the boring history lecture was going on. With his earbuds still in his ears, his head is slightly tilted and his body is curled up. His face has a strong bone structure; when his eyes are open he looks bright and alert, but he's also attractive when he's asleep. It's just that his face is a bit pale from the cold.

Shen Wei gazes at him. Zhao Yunlan's sleeping face is open and peaceful; it's like even if the sky were falling, he'd still find a corner to fall asleep. Shen Wei is transfixed as he quietly watches Zhao Yunlan, his face softening. He carefully removes the earbuds, rolls them up and sets them aside; then he takes Zhao Yunlan's jacket and wraps it around him.

Guo Changcheng is holding a snoring competition with another boy. Wang Zheng is tidying up the cooking pot and stove; some soft clinking and clanking echoes around the hut.

Shen Wei exhales and settles on his side, turning away from the others. After a while, his breathing is slow and steady, as if he were asleep.

But where no-one can see, his eyes are wide open.

In the dim light of the night, he keeps quietly watching Zhao Yunlan, as if he plans to do so until sunrise. Shen Wei has restrained himself for far too long; he can't help but indulge for a moment. With Zhao Yunlan lying so close by, his thoughts are out of control.

He wants to reach out and embrace that warm body; kiss his eyes, hair and lips, taste him whole, and possess his everything.

Shen Wei's breathing trembles, his longing is fervent, like a person freezing to death would long for a bowl of hot soup. But he doesn't move a muscle, as if... as if only thinking about it is enough to satisfy him.

Da Qing curls up into a ball next to Wang Zheng, tail wagging. When it's almost midnight and everyone is presumably asleep, he whispers, "Are those skulls or entire skeletons buried in the courtyard? Who were they?"

Wang Zheng's plastic face is hidden inside her hoodie, and she hesitates before answering, "Just skulls; the Hanga always had a tradition of beheading."

Da Qing can't help but wonder. "So how did they go extinct?"

"The little girl said it was because of inbreeding."

"Don't use that stupid reason to fool me, silly girl. Even horses can avoid that problem, are humans really too stupid to realise?" Da Qing's whiskers quiver impatiently. "Besides, polygamy is popular in many ethnic minorities. Not marrying outside the tribe simply means the woman can't marry an outsider, and the man can't take an outsider as his main wife, that's all. How can you call that strict? And anyway, the tribe must've had a few families, they wouldn't all have been close kin to each other."

Wang Zheng looks down at the cat, and pats him on the head. "You're just a cat, eat your cat food and dried fish. Why do you care about human problems?"

Anyone who just joined the SIU would probably think that Wang Zheng isn't even twenty yet, but now, with her face obscured and her speech so old-fashioned, she comes across like an old person..

Da Qing rolls around comfortably like any cat would as Wang Zheng strokes him. But his eyes are still half-open, gazing into space.

The night deepens.

The small mountain hut is silent; all that can be heard is steady breathing, snoring, and purring.

Just after midnight, Zhao Yunlan suddenly opens his eyes, staring right into Shen Wei's gentle, spectacle-less gaze. Shen Wei has a moment of panic and looks away, but Zhao Yunlan doesn't care and quietly sits up. He listens intently, then turns towards Shen Wei, making a 'don't make any sound' gesture with his index finger to his lips.

He peels himself out of the sleeping bag, grabs a torch, and heads outside.

Da Qing meows and scurries along. Shen Wei hesitates; but he's worried after all, so he follows.

Once Zhao Yunlan is outside, he realises the torch is redundant.

The entire valley is illuminated by unworldly flames: on one side is a glacial mountain range, on the other a blazing inferno.

They're still a few thousand metres away from the summit, but they can hear the crackling and screeching of the flames and feel the sting of fire scorching their skin.

The whole sky is lit sunset-orange.

It's as if they aren't on earth anymore – the flames engulfing the valley put people in a trance, where they forget time and place.

The whole courtyard seems to react to it, and the ground is trembling. The frozen soil cracks, exposing the skulls. They come in all shapes and sizes, and their empty eye sockets are flashing. To the sounds of bones grinding, the skulls all move to face in the same direction, as if arranged by someone.

More and more skulls emerge from the ground, all strangely looking towards the scorching blaze as if worshipping it. As the ground is shaking, the bones make creepy gnashing sounds.

Zhao Yunlan extends an arm to block Shen Wei behind him and picks up the cat. "Fatty, be careful!"

"That's Hellfire." Suddenly Wang Zheng stands behind them, her hoodie gone and the expressionless plastic face clearly visible. Shen Wei has yet to figure out what this plastic body is when 'Wang Zheng' crumbles to the ground.

Shen Wei instinctively gives her a hand, and the doll lets out an indecent moan. Startled, the gentlemanly Professor Shen snatches his hand back and drops the doll.

A girl in a white dress appears and says, "As guilty souls enter the Gates of the Underworld, Hellfire burns and flares to welcome them. It is said that this is Hellfire; it has come from the Underworld to burn those who are judged guilty."

Zhao Yunlan says, "Bullshit, shut up."

Wang Zheng points a finger. "See for yourself."

The skulls have all turned around, and now they're looking back at them from the door. Their dark eye sockets send chills down everyone's spines; they open their jaws and jump around as if they were laughing.

Everyone alive, including the cat, is getting goosebumps, but Wang Zheng calmly says, "My people... they all want to flay me, tear out my veins and suck up my blood."

Zhao Yunlan takes out his gun. "Wang Zheng, get back into your body. Shen Wei, go inside the hut."

Wang Zheng ignores him and sighs.

"But..." she says miserably, "I'm already dead."

"Are you on the rag? Stop babbling and go inside!" Zhao Yunlan grabs her ghostly form, violently stuffs her into the doll, and throws the doll to Zhu Hong, who has been awakened by the commotion.

The skulls open their mouths and pounce towards them. Zhao Yunlan holds the door latch and fires three shots.

His gun is probably not firing bullets – the skulls scream and turn into white smoke as they're shot.

Zhao Yunlan closes the door, but a skull is trapped in the gap. Zhao Yunlan swiftly puts away the gun and takes out a dagger. He crushes the skull like an eggshell and slams the door shut.

The skulls outside bash and bang at the door; they jump up and peer menacingly in through the window. A few students have woken from the noise. They see what is happening but remain surprisingly calm... any normal person would think they were just dreaming.

Even Guo Changcheng is quite calm; in this small hut there's the invincible Chief Zhao, the brave talking cat, the fake monk who defeated the hungry ghost, the raw-meat-devouring snake woman, and the mysterious Chu Shuzhi who Guo Changcheng still doesn't dare talk to... Guo Changcheng is sure they're all quite safe despite the situation.

This poor kid really has blind faith in his colleagues.

Chapter 32

"Amitabha!" Lin Jing and Zhao Yunlan are holding the door together. The fake monk gasps, staring at the bouncing skulls outside the windows. "I despair of a world in which even skulls try to act cute! What *are* these things?"

Zhao Yunlan turns and asks Wang Zheng, "What are these things that are coming for you? Not only do they bite people, they even tried to bite *you*; aren't they afraid the plastic will poison them?"

Lin Jing thinks Zhao Yunlan might have said too much, and tugs furtively at the Chief's clothes.

The class captain heard it and snorted, but then she notices her classmates wry looks and realises the situation doesn't call for laughter. She covers her mouth at once.

"In 1712, a civil war broke out among the Hanga." Wang Zheng stands up with the help of Zhu Hong and covers her face again with the hoodie. "The rebels won, and the Old Headman died. His wives and children, and the one hundred and twelve warriors who followed him were all beheaded according to the old custom, and their bodies burned. Their heads were buried in the courtyard of the watch house, to be enslaved for eternity."

Zhu Hong stares briefly. "So these are their skulls in the courtyard?"

The skulls keep bashing against the door.

Zhao Yunlan gives Chu Shuzhi a look. Chu Shuzhi instantly takes off his windbreaker. The sweater he wears underneath is quite unusual, with lots of pockets that make him look like a walking storage bag. He pats down all those pockets, then counts out like money a dozen

yellow paper talismans marked with cinnabar powder. He sticks one on each corner of the door.

The talismans shine with a faint white light, and the skulls stop banging at the door.

Then, Chu Shuzhi starts sticking talismans on the windows, walls, and all over the hut, as if he was posting advertisements. The skulls outside feel the power and move away, not daring to bash against the hut again.

Zhao Yunlan stops holding the door shut. Despite the freezing cold, he's soaked in sweat.

He sits beside the stove, tears open a bag of milk powder and pours it into the cooking pot with mineral water. To Wang Zheng, he says, "Let's all drink some milk, and after we finish, you have to explain to me what's happening."

"I'm sorry," is all Wang Zheng says. Her lips are pressed firmly together as if she'd rather die than say anything. When she finally has to, she says only one sentence. "Open the door and throw me out, then. No matter what's out there, it won't hurt you if I'm not with you."

Zhao Yunlan asks calmly, "Do you hear how ridiculous you sound?"

Although Wang Zheng looks scary, she has a serious and gentle temperament. She doesn't talk much and isn't close to anyone, but she's always polite. She rarely says hurtful things like this; now she's conscious of losing her temper. After Zhao Yunlan's comment, she bows her head and simply stops talking.

Chu Shuzhi stands beside the window and watches to make sure the skulls aren't coming back. He signals to Zhao Yunlan. "Have someone stay up to keep watch, and the others can go back to sleep. These things aren't a big problem, no need to worry."

The crisis has only just passed and already one of the students, the beanstalk guy, is looking for more trouble. "Professor, can I go take a few pictures? Not outside, just from the window."

Shen Wei really wants to know how this kid grew up to have such a sense of adventure.

An indecently grabby hand comes around Shen Wei's shoulder and Zhao Yunlan leans in, lowering his voice. "It's not against the rules to take pictures, but you should know they used to say cameras can capture the souls of people. Human souls are good at staying inside their bodies, but here, where dead souls are roaming... do you want to take away a few ghosts to keep as pets?"

The beanstalk trembles in fear at Zhao Yunlan's creepy ghost-story tone.

Zhao Yunlan smiles and continues, "I guess you could bury them in flower pots, and then whenever midnight comes they'll come out and start gnawing at the pots, gnawing at your table when they've eaten the pots, gnawing at your bed when they've eaten the table..."

Zhao Yunlan trails off, and the beanstalk squirms in discomfort.

Shen Wei's mouth twitches. "Are you all right?"

The boy's face looks uneasy, and he stutters, "I... I... I have to pee."

So scared that he's wetting himself? After a stunned second, Zhao Yunlan starts howling with laughter.

"It's only three hours till sunrise," Chu Shuzhi says. "Don't worry, my talismans can last for five hours, but you better wait for dawn to go to the toilet. If something wants to bite you, pee on it; virgin pee repels evil spirits. It probably won't kill them but maybe it'll give them a concussion."

Wang Zheng says softly, "I can stay up and—"

Zhao Yunlan interrupts, "If something goes wrong, you won't be able to stop it; let me do it."

He takes out a wind-resistant lighter. "Anyone afraid of second-hand smoke? If not, I'm gonna use this little precious to stay awake."

The students are surprisingly calm; they giggle and return to their sleeping bags... perhaps Zhao Yunlan makes everyone feel very safe, or maybe they weren't fully awake.

Shortly, the hut is all quiet. The only sounds come from the skulls rolling on the snow outside. Da Qing, nestled in Zhao Yunlan's arms, closes his eyes. Wang Zheng sits in a corner at the far wall, deep in thought.

The torches are all turned off, and only the talismans are faintly glowing in the dark.

Zhao Yunlan stands beside the window where cold air comes in through a small gap; he turns to block it with his back and lights a cigarette.

He thinks back to when he was woken up by the weird noises. He remembers seeing Shen Wei gaze at him. But Shen Wei looked too embarrassed, so he pretended not to notice.

Zhao Yunlan is almost certain that Shen Wei didn't just wake up from the noise, and he didn't look like he was an insomniac, either. His expression is a complicated mix of serene and sad... it's as if he has been staring at Zhao Yunlan all night.

Maybe Shen Wei likes men and is interested in Zhao Yunlan. Zhao Yunlan would consider that normal - he thinks of himself as not too shabby: he has a stable income, is of a suitable age, not too old and

not too immature. Though he suffers from mild machismo, he usually does care for other people's feelings. And he never shows his savage ill-temper to people he's not close to, so people who aren't around him day and night tend to be under the impression that he's nice and capable.

But whether it's lust, attraction, or a sudden crush, Zhao Yunlan can't imagine that any of those would make someone stay up all night just to foolishly watch him sleep.

Zhao Yunlan thinks of the first time he met Shen Wei. He must have had a deep connection with Shen Wei due to some circumstance he doesn't know about.

But when was that?

Zhao Yunlan is lost in thought for a long time, until the entire cigarette has burned down. He twists it out and carelessly throws it out of the window. The cigarette hits a skull, which turns black, twitches twice, and stops moving.

Before he was ten years old, he didn't understand anything, probably even had trouble telling men from women; so nothing could have happened then. At worst he'd have smashed some people's windows with stones. For the time when he was older, his memories are clear and coherent; he remembers causes and consequences in sequence, without memory holes or any confusion.

There are indeed ways to mess with someone's memory, such as hypnosis or other, secret techniques that Zhao Yunlan can think of. But these methods only prevent the person from recollecting the altered memories. Human experience is incredibly complex, and only the affected person can know in detail what happened.

For instance, if a man had a car accident, when he looks back, he'll realise the accident happened because he was running late. And why was he late? Because he had a stomachache and was stuck on

the toilet. Why did he have a stomachache? Because he ate too much greasy food. And why did he eat so much? Because his fast food coupon was going to expire...

If he kept going, he would think of who gave him the coupon, whether he got it from someone else or picked it up on the street, and so on.

Every minute detail in someone's memory can be recalled from interconnected events. Even the cleverest manipulator can't possibly have a clear picture of other people's bowel movements, menstrual cycle, dating situation and random jerking off, etc. If someone's memory is manipulated, these details will be obscured, and when that person tries to recollect them, it will appear unnatural.

As luck would have it, Zhao Yunlan is an expert on memory.

He's known since childhood how fragile and crucial a person's memory is. When Da Qing handed him the Guardian Order Token, the first lesson he taught him was to regularly reorganise his memories through meditation. Zhao Yunlan is certain that he didn't know Shen Wei before they met.

Then... perhaps the decent and charismatic Professor Shen is actually a stalker who has been in love with Zhao Yunlan for a long time. But of course, Zhao Yunlan knows that's practically impossible. If anything, Zhao Yunlan would be the creepy stalker.

Or perhaps, this 'Shen Wei' is just a disguise, and he isn't an ordinary person at all.

If Zhao Yunlan can't find anything out about him, he's either really ordinary, or really extraordinary.

Three hours have passed by quickly. By the time the sky begins to light up, the skulls have all fallen to the ground, no longer moving. The creepy blaze in the distance has burnt out.

Zhao Yunlan gently pushes open the door and goes out into the courtyard to confirm that the sun has risen, day has broken, and the ghosts are gone. Then he goes back inside, rubs his face, leans against the wall and dozes off.

"When it's fully light," he thinks, "I'll find a chance to talk to Shen Wei." He falls asleep with that thought in his mind.

Soon he's sunk in a deep slumber. Perhaps the whole ordeal of driving all day in the snow and being on edge earlier has really worn him out.

An hour later, Zhu Hong wakes him up.

Zhao Yunlan realises someone covered him with a blanket, and his eyes go to Shen Wei. But Zhu Hong interrupts him.

"Chief Zhao, do you know where Wang Zheng has gone?"

Chapter 33

What? Zhao Yunlan startles. He's a light sleeper, and this kind of prompt would normally wake him up even if he was dead drunk. His brain feels like it's wrapped in flour and his eyelids are heavy.

"Wang Zheng?" He pinches the bridge of his nose and blinks sticky eyes; struggling to sit up, he says, only half-conscious, "I slept for less than an hour... she was still here just now?"

Zhu Hong scrutinises him sombrely.

She has known Zhao Yunlan for many years; even if he's tired he'll only sleep lightly. They're in the wilderness now, and beneath them is a heap of skulls, and yet he still fell into deep sleep. That has never happened before. Being unconventional is different from not paying attention. Zhu Hong leans down and sniffs.

"What—"

"Don't move." Zhu Hong pulls off the blanket, picks up a corner and carefully peels away the fibres along the edge, using her long nails to pick up some brown powder from the inside. She sniffs it, and understands at once. "You were drugged."

The dizziness fades but the sounds come to Zhao Yunlan as if he's underwater. When he finally makes out what Zhu Hong is saying, he realises he, the trickster, has been tricked by one of his own⁴⁸, and a million words condense down to just two: "Oh, fuck!"

With everything happening so fast, Zhao Yunlan isn't sure what upsets him more: that Wang Zheng drugged him or that the person who gave him the blanket wasn't Shen Wei.

"Get me some mineral water," he says quietly. "I like it cold."

"It's not like we have hot water." Zhu Hong grabs a frozen bottle and shakes it, making pieces of ice fall off.

Zhao Yunlan drinks a little, frowning, and then pours the rest over his head.

"Are you crazy!" — "What are you doing!?" Zhu Hong and Shen Wei exclaim together.

Shen Wei wants to stop him but he's standing too far away — ever since Zhao Yunlan caught him staring in the middle of the night, Shen Wei has been trying to keep his distance.

"Lin Jing, stay behind and take care of Professor Shen and the students," Zhao Yunlan says, sullenly ignoring them. He wipes the cold water off his face, shakes out his crumpled jacket and puts it on. He stomps outside, kicking a skull so it lands three metres away. "Everyone else, follow me!"

Lin Jing hastens to ask, "What do we do with the skulls?"

"Dig them up and smash them all."

Lin Jing is taken aback. "That... wouldn't that offend some..."

"I wouldn't touch them if they meant no harm; I wouldn't so much as throw a cigarette butt into their territory." Zhao Yunlan turns around at the doorway. Coldly, he adds, "But since they do, I'll dig up all their graves. Last night we came here politely, and look how they welcomed us. Now it's daytime, so it's time for payback. Smash them all and I'll be responsible for anything that happens."

Zhao Yunlan has the temper of a gangster. When he's mad, nobody dares to provoke him, so Lin Jing shuts up.

Zhu Hong runs to catch up with him, and gathers the courage to say, "Wang Zheng... probably has her reasons."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't turn around. "Bullshit. Say something that's not bullshit, or shut up."

Zhu Hong shuts it for two seconds, but can't hold it in any longer. "Why can't you talk decently? Do you use that tone to pick up girls too, you jerk?"

Zhao Yunlan finally looks at her, and raising his eyebrows, says something even more annoying. "When did I say I was trying to pick you up?"

Zhu Hong really wants to slap him right across the face, but she doesn't dare, so she holds her anger and grits her teeth. Viciously she says, "No wonder all your past relationships have ended terribly. You'll be an old bachelor for the rest of your life!"

Zhao Yunlan quickly leads the group to where they parked the cars. He takes a few small travel bags out of the boot. "The cars can't go up there, we'll probably have to walk. The top pocket of each bag contains high-calorie rations and a small bottle of water. Take those out and carry them on your person. If we get separated or you lose the bags, you'll still have emergency supplies."

"And these—" Zhao Yunlan takes out a big pile of supplies and hands them to Zhu Hong. "Take these back to the hut for everyone."

Zhu Hong is surprised and stares at him. "You're making me go back?"

"Not that again... you may look human but you're not warm-blooded." Impatiently, Zhao Yunlan slams the boot of the car shut, locks it, and signals Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng to come. He waves to Zhu Hong. "All right woman, rush back to the hut before you're frozen into hibernation. Oh right, take this, don't drink it cold, heat it up a bit."

He throws a small bottle at Zhu Hong. She looks down and recognizes a bottle of yellow rice wine, a warming drink not found in the Northwest. Zhao Yunlan must have prepared it beforehand; needless to say who he prepared it for.

Zhu Hong suddenly feels a bit touched, though he has a strange way of showing that he cares.

~~~

To conserve their strength, the three men don't talk as they walk. Luckily the sky is clear; although the wind is bitterly cold, at least the sun can lessen its harshness.

Guo Changcheng feels like they've crossed three or four mountains and must be way past the original destination of Clearstream Village. In the afternoon, they finally stop in a small hollow protected from the wind.

Chu Shuzhi opens a few packs of beef jerky, and the frozen men share it among them. Zhao Yunlan sits on a rock, takes out a detailed map, and studies it carefully.

"Do you know where we're going?" Chu Shuzhi asks.

Zhao Yunlan makes a new mark on the map, and says without looking up, "The place where Wang Zheng's people used to live isn't the same as Clearstream Village. I checked her file."

Chu Shuzhi is surprised; he thought that Zhao Yunlan was so busy pleasing his many 'brothers' and obsessing over his crush that he didn't make time for important stuff. He can't help but want to know more. "What happened to her?"

"Wang Zheng herself is Hanga; her name used to be Gelan. She changed her name when she joined the Guardian Order," Zhao



Yunlan says. "The Hanga people were neither friendly nor welcoming, and were very xenophobic. They wouldn't have stayed in Clearstream Village, it's too close to the main road and scenic spots."

"There's actually a record of them in history?" Chu Shuzhi is startled again.

"Not history." Zhao Yunlan marks three spots on the map. "In the *Ancient Scroll of Dark Magic*."

He straightens out the old map, and stops at a spot with his pen. Chu Shuzhi can tell at once that's probably where the watch house was.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "When I entered the courtyard, I thought the skulls must be related to the legendary Luobula restriction magic. In Hanga language, 'Luobula' means 'departed souls'. And it's 'restriction' not in the sense of 'proscription', but in the sense of 'imprisonment'... Guo Changcheng, why are you standing over there, get over here! You've passed your trial period so you're an official member now, try to have a more enthusiastic work attitude, will you?"

Guo Changcheng hurriedly stumbles forward.

"So this magic is used to imprison departed souls," Chu Shuzhi concludes.

"Well, the Hanga had traditions of beheading and necromancy," Zhao Yunlan says. "It's probably related to their social structure. Their tribe had a system of slavery, and their people believed that their slaves were to serve them even after death. They would behead the slaves and send their skulls to the altar at the top of the mountain, then they used magic to seal away their souls to enslave them forever."

Chu Shuzhi asks, "Why bury the skulls at the mountaintop? Does that have a special meaning?"

"Yes. The Hanga used to live together with many other ethnic groups, and even though they didn't intermarry, they were probably influenced by their religions. Some of their beliefs originated in our religion. But of course, their core concepts were different. Unlike Buddhism, they clearly didn't believe that all things contain spirits. However, having seen the power of avalanches, they did believe in mountain spirits, and that they were powerful enough to suppress the souls of the dead. They chose to build a ritual site at the Spirit Portal of a mountain... which is a place near the mountaintop, but hidden from the sun. The Luobula restriction magic was influenced by the belief of reincarnation in Buddhism. It was thought that a triangle is a complete shape, which can form an enclosing wall to trap souls forever, without a chance to escape."

Chu Shuzhi is very smart, so he instantly follows the train of thought. "This means that there must be three identical ritual sites at similar altitudes, forming a symmetrical triangle!"

It's so wonderfully efficient to talk to someone with brains! Zhao Yunlan nods; the triangle he draws on the map is almost equilateral. He then draws a small circle inside it. "Imprison the souls here, and they shall be enslaved for eternity... this must be where the Hanga tribe used to live."

"Let me see." Chu Shuzhi's spatial orientation is superb; he can conceptualise a two-dimensional map in three dimensions. He studies it at an angle and finally says, "Look, isn't this the valley that was on fire last night?"

"Must be." Zhao Yunlan puts away the map and stuffs his mouth full of beef. "Eat quickly, then we'll get going again."

Chu Shuzhi chews the jerky slowly, pauses for a while, and glances at Guo Changcheng's blank and bewildered expression. Finally, he

says, "Chief Zhao, you must have studied this dark magic before and not just for this trip?"

Zhao Yunlan says lightly, "If you can't tell ecstasy from heroin, how can you join the narcotics bureau?"

Chu Shuzhi pauses thoughtfully, and gives a rare smile; but his face is too used to frowning and the smile looks out of place. "If that's the case, why doesn't our team have training sessions?"

Zhao Yunlan stops chewing and stares at Chu Shuzhi.

Chu Shuzhi stares back.

Guo Changcheng looks here and there and cannot figure out what's happening. They both scare him; he doesn't dare say anything and just keeps his head down.

After some time, Zhao Yunlan says, "Lao Chu, you're smart. I rarely meet someone as smart as you. I won't waste time explaining; I'm sure you know why."

Chu Shuzhi stares at the beef jerky wrapper for a long time, as if waiting for it to sprout flowers. But he doesn't say anything more, and nobody knows what he's thinking. He's still wearing his usual expression, as if the conversation hadn't happened.

Fifteen minutes later, they set off again; this time Chu Shuzhi is leading the way.

If the morning was sunny, snow now begins to fall. The three head west, and spend almost an hour walking in a semi-circle down the mountain to the mid-level. Guo Changcheng suddenly sees something in the snow that's... rather familiar.

He scurries forward and starts digging with his thick gloves on. With a shock, he finds it's a plastic arm.

Zhao Yunlan hears Guo Changcheng scream and shout, "Chief Zhao! Chief Zhao! That's Wang Zheng's arm, it's her arm!"

*'He really is a mascot: bring him along and you'll have some strange luck,'* Zhao Yunlan thinks, following after him. He snatches the arm and smacks Guo Changcheng on the head with it. "The arm has fallen off that fake and cheap doll you bought. The arm is here, but where is she?"

The light snowfall couldn't have covered her footsteps so quickly. Zhao Yunlan looks around and suddenly up, because he's realised: maybe the arm fell from above.

Chu Shuzhi follows his line of sight, then glances down at the map. He pats Zhao Yunlan on the shoulder and points upward, "Look at that."

Around three metres above them on the slope is the entrance to a giant stone cave covered in weed and snow. The layer of snow at the entrance seems to have been walked on, which is what has drawn Chu Shuzhi's attention.

## Chapter 34

All is quiet in the small mountain hut. Zhao Yunlan's friend contacts Lin Jing, telling him that the road will probably be blocked for another three to four days. Shen Wei briefly discusses with the students and they agree that given the aftermath of the avalanche, the survivors in Clearstream Village probably wouldn't want to entertain them. They decide to head back to Dragon City when Zhao Yunlan returns.

The class captain heats up some milk for Da Qing and starts preparing breakfast. The Professor tells the other students to help Lin Jing clean up the courtyard.

It's a simple but violent task; under Lin Jing's direction, they dig up all the skulls that tried to bite them last night, and line them up on the ground. Then the fake monk takes a big rock and smashes all of them to pieces, as his Chief instructed.

A while later, Zhu Hong returns with a large bag, taller than a person. Superwoman puts down the bag, takes out a small bottle, heats it, and drinks the liquid down. Then she quickly takes over what Lin Jing has been doing, and smashes the skulls one by one as if she were cracking walnuts. Her success rate is a whopping one hundred percent; it's efficient and quality work.

This straightforward and brutal morning workout continues until the girl inside calls them in for breakfast.

Zhu Hong must be on drugs: she pushes away a boy and Da Qing who are sitting next to Shen Wei, and squeezes herself in between them. Nonchalantly, she says, "Professor Shen, can you pass me the chocolate sauce?"

She mixes sweet with savoury: one cannot imagine what chocolate beef jerky would taste like. Zhu Hong eats while peeking at the calm Shen Wei. She pretends to focus on the chocolate sauce and says, without looking up, "Our Chief is courting you."

Shen Wei pauses and looks at her.

Zhu Hong is still looking down, and says as if making small talk, "You wouldn't have been unaware, would you?"

Shen Wei's expression doesn't change, and he doesn't answer either. He hands her another pack of chocolate sauce. "Want some more?"

Zhu Hong stops talking, and looks up; she stares at Shen Wei with a very peculiar gaze. Her round irises gradually contract into two thin slits – the eyes of a cold-blooded animal. The snake eyes look exceptionally creepy on her pretty face.

But Shen Wei only glances at her, and returns his attention to the food he is holding as if nothing has happened.

"Then do you like him?" Zhu Hong asks softly by his ear with a lowered voice.

Shen Wei returns calmly, "Why do you want to know?"

"I..." Zhu Hong rolls her eyes. "I'm nosy. Every exploited and oppressed employee has the right to be nosy about their boss."

Shen Wei looks at her with a half-smile. "If you're so nosy, can't you figure it out yourself?"

Then he laughs lightly and picks up the pot of heated milk with a wet tissue. "This food is dry, would you like something to drink?"

Zhu Hong's expression twists for a moment, then she manages a smile. "Sure, I'll have some, thanks!" Her hand accidentally crushes a few dents into the metal shell of her thermos cup.

Shen Wei doesn't seem to notice. Pouring her some milk, he says, habitually considerate, "Drink it while it's warm."

The dents on the cup deepen in her grasp.

A hint of a smile seems to flash across Shen Wei's eyes as he puts the milk back; but just as he's about to speak again, he seems to feel something and jerks his head towards the window into the valley. His expression changes.

Zhu Hong doesn't know whether she's over-sensitive or not, but Shen Wei's grim expression makes her very uncomfortable. Instinctively, she wants to move away from him, but she stops herself.

Why would she be afraid of a helpless university teacher? That's not logical!

Sunlight hits Shen Wei's glasses, reflecting in a blinding gleam.

"I'm full," Zhu Hong hears him say. "I'll go tidy up the courtyard. Please don't run off on your own; follow the officers' orders."

With this, he walks straight out into the courtyard.

Nobody is paying attention to this small interlude... and oddly, twenty minutes later when everyone has finished their breakfast and goes back into the courtyard, nobody realises that Shen Wei is missing. He's like someone who never existed. Nobody, not even Zhu Hong and Lin Jing, notices there ought to be one more person.

~~~

Ten minutes later, the missing Shen Wei appears at the spot where Wang Zheng's 'arm' was found.

He doesn't even have a jacket. The wind whips up the collar of his shirt and his hair; drifting snow falls on his glasses. He doesn't seem to feel the cold.

He stands at the bottom of the slope, looks around, and suddenly extends his arm, palm facing downward in a clawing gesture.

His hand is incredibly pale, with his blue veins visible as on an immaculately crafted model. The ground shakes with his movement, the wind strengthens and whirls into a howling vortex, soaring into the clouds like a sharp blade. Then, the entire upper layer of heavy ice and snow is lifted up into the air, to expose cracked frozen soil.

Just then, something emerges from the ground and shoots at Shen Wei's back like an arrow.

He seems completely defenceless.

There's a scent of decay and flowers. The next moment, Shen Wei turns around at the speed of light and clutches the creature by the neck.

What he's holding is a demon beast.

Shen Wei's eyebrows twitch, and his expression is ferocious. The demon beast makes a cackling sound, glaring at Shen Wei with bloodshot eyes.

"Rules are rules," Shen Wei says blandly. "You blatantly crossed the boundary and left the Profane Lands without permission. The punishment is death."

He lifts the demon beast up, and it struggles in mid-air like a dying fish. Shen Wei tightens his grip; the demon beast thrashes violently,

then stops moving.

He throws it on the ground, and the corpse disappears as it touches the snow. A peculiar flower blossoms where it fell. Shen Wei stomps on it, snapping its stem without looking.

He points his finger to the ground, and a faint black line suddenly extends across the snow. It climbs up the slope into the stone cave, following a trail of barely visible footprints. Soon, a loud crack sounds, and Shen Wei's eyes flash. The black line on the ground breaks into several pieces.

At the same time, a sharp screech echoes from far away and eight demon beasts emerge from the ground. These look different from the ones Zhao Yunlan saw on the rooftop. Each of them is at least three metres tall, red-eyed and howling ferociously; the snowy mountains quiver.

Shen Wei bellows, "Puppets!"

A cloud of grey smoke rises underneath his feet and swivels intimately around his legs. Shen Wei points with the toe of his shoe, and the cloud flies into the stone cave.

Then, a black blade appears in Shen Wei's hand: three feet and three inches long, the back of the blade thick and pitch black. There's a slight glimmer at the edge of the blade... only the souls that will be slain can see it.

He moves.

The beasts' howling stops abruptly. In just a split second, all are beheaded at once.

Their huge bodies crumble down but more and more of them emerge, like perennial weeds. It seems like someone desperately wants to stall him.

~~~

Zhao Yunlan and the other two have long entered the cave. At first, it seems ordinary, but as they move forward it gets deeper and darker, and eventually pitch black. When not even the faintest ray of light remains, Zhao Yunlan is forced to switch on his torch.

Around a hundred metres further in, a door blocks their way.

By torchlight, it cannot be seen very clearly, but it seems to be made of some ancient alloy; it's rusty, and three skulls with open jaws hang on it, one on top and one on each side. An inverted triangle is marked on it.

"A triangle? Is it Luobula restriction magic?" Chu Shuzhi moves closer and puts on gloves. He cautiously probes the door with his fingers, and then knocks on it lightly as he puts his ear against it. "Some parts of it are hollow. There must be some hidden switch. It's not that complicated; I'll examine it."

Zhao Yunlan kicks Guo Changcheng in the butt. "Move in closer and learn from your Chu-ge."

Guo Changcheng stumbles forward mindlessly.

Chu Shuzhi looks down on him with disdain—arrogant and intelligent people don't suffer fools gladly. But since the Chief is here, he dutifully explains his actions as he examines the door. "It's nothing remarkable, a lot of mechanisms are similar to this. When you've seen a few more, you'll understand them," he says while taking out a torch. He points the torch at the door gap and shines it up and down. "There's one thick column with thirty five small ones, making a total of thirty six. Since it's divisible by six, they're probably all hooked together."

He gestures at Guo Changcheng. "Get down, I'll step on your shoulders."

Guo Changcheng kneels down like a big dog.

Chu Shuzhi doesn't give him an easy time: he steps right onto Guo Changcheng, and starts knocking at the triangle.

It's not easy to support the weight of a man... although Chu Shuzhi is very skinny, Guo Changcheng is very feeble. Soon, he starts shaking; but since he's afraid that Chu Shuzhi might fall, he grits his teeth and stays still.

Just when Guo Changcheng thinks he's about to be squashed, Chu Shuzhi jumps down and says, "There are thirty six iron columns behind this door; because of the secret switches there are hollow spots. The materials are different too, so density varies. If your hearing is sensitive enough, you'll be able to tell the difference with practice."

Guo Changcheng kneels on the floor, eyes wide open, huffing and panting with his lips parted; he doesn't understand a word he's saying!

Chu Shuzhi glances at him and ignores him, saying to Zhao Yunlan behind him, "Now that I know its general structure, I'll have to rely on experience to deduce the remaining details."

Chu Shuzhi triggers a switch and pulls out a piece from the centre of the triangle; Guo Changcheng is so startled he falls back on his ass and scoots away.

Chu Shuzhi feels inside the round hole for a while, then turns back and asks, "There are thirty six columns around this circle, but I think only three can be triggered. Which three do you think they are, Chief Zhao?"

"South, Northwest, Northeast." Zhao Yunlan says without thinking.

Guo Changcheng finally hears something he thinks he can talk about, and quickly asks, "So... are we counting upwards as North, downwards as South, left West and right East?"

Chu Shuzhi and Zhao Yunlan tacitly ignore his existence. Guo Changcheng's self-esteem is crushed and he doesn't dare say anything else.

But then, Zhao Yunlan grabs his drooping head and pulls, forcing Guo Changcheng to look up. Zhao Yunlan shines the torch along the metal doorframe in a half-circle. He points to the left and says, "What's that?"

Guo Changcheng says stupidly, "...Mountains."

Zhao Yunlan roughly turns Guo Changcheng's head and shines his torchlight onto a relief to the right of the door. "What about that?"

"Waves... water?"

"The Hanga people lived between the rivers and the mountains, from the mid-levels down to the valley. I told you earlier, idiot: because of the mountains it was hard for them to tell directions. To them, upwards were the mountains, and that's the South, downwards was the water, and that's the North. What's with the left West and right East?" Zhao Yunlan smacks him on the head. "Even pigs are smarter than you!"

As they talk, Chu Shuzhi has already cracked the secret switches; the door opens slowly.

A stench of humidity and decay invades their nostrils.



## Chapter 35

"I'll lead the way. Xiao Guo, follow me. Lao Chu, stay at the back." Zhao Yunlan starts walking, and then thinks of something. He pulls his spare gun from his ankle holster and asks Guo Changcheng, "Did you pass the firearms test?"

Guo Changcheng lowers his head in shame. "The examiner said unless he dies and comes back to life, he won't let me pass."

Zhao Yunlan sighs. "What about a knife? Can you use that?"

Guo Changcheng lowers his head even further.

Chu Shuzhi laughs cynically, making Guo Changcheng even more miserable.

"I recruited a World Peace Ambassador." Zhao Yunlan looks gloomily into the endless cave. Finally he fumbles until he pulls out a miniature stun baton and hands it to Guo Changcheng. Impatiently, he explains its use, as if teaching a kid how to wipe his ass. "Take this; it's very simple. Just hold it out in front of yourself, no need to do anything else. Just try not to be too scared to move, can you do that?"

Guo Changcheng holds the small gadget and shakes it a bit, but nothing happens. The thing looks like a little torch. But Guo Changcheng doesn't suspect that the Chief is lying; he thinks he must be too dumb to understand what this does. He has a tendency to think the worst of himself.

Tired of explaining, Zhao Yunlan starts moving forward. Guo Changcheng runs a few steps to catch up, pondering whether he

should ask. A normal human's rational mind would tell him that under dangerous circumstances he shouldn't be kept in the dark, but...

Guo Changcheng stares at Zhao Yunlan's tall figure, and thinks fearfully that if he asked, the Chief would probably bite his head off.

When he imagines a furious Zhao Yunlan, he trembles, and the baton suddenly shoots out a sparkling flare, lunging at Zhao Yunlan from behind.

Luckily Zhao Yunlan is incredibly alert. When he hears something suspicious, he swiftly dodges. The electric current charges deep into the cave with a rush of heat.

Chu Shuzhi shouts, "Fuck!"

Zhao Yunlan shouts, "Fuck!"

Chu Shuzhi stares at Guo Changcheng in shock. He never thought this piece of garbage would do what nobody in the SIU dares to even think about: beat up the bastard Chief.

Zhao Yunlan surreptitiously wipes mud and water off his clothes. "What the fuck did you do!?"

Guo Changcheng is extraordinarily innocent. "I, I don't know... it it it it suddenly moved..."

"Bullshit, that thing attacks when you're scared. The more frightened you are, the more powerful it becomes. It's totally tailor-made for you, all right?" Zhao Yunlan is losing his mind, "What the hell were you thinking looking at my back that got you so scared!? We were just walking!"

After a strange silence Guo Changcheng, quivering, points at the stomping and enraged Zhao Yunlan. "This... I was thinking about this."

Zhao Yunlan is speechless.

Chu Shuzhi really can't hold it in anymore; he bursts out laughing. Then he reaches out. "Let me take a look."

Chu Shuzhi rarely talks to him. Guo Changcheng is flattered and dazed, and obediently hands it to him.

Chu Shuzhi shakes the 'stun baton' next to his ear, and knocks on it. Realisation dawns in his eyes, and he throws it back to Guo Changcheng. He gives Zhao Yunlan a meaningful look. "Chief Zhao, this is probably something shady, isn't it."

Zhao Yunlan chuckles. "As if you're not shady yourself... careful!"

His expression changes; he ducks and pushes Guo Changcheng aside. There's a loud bang like a large explosion, and a shock wave rushes by above their heads. A putrid odour follows, and then a giant comb-shaped object hurtles through the air. Its base is thick wood, around three metres long, and covered with sharp blades. Anyone it hits will instantly be turned into mince meat.

Chu Shuzhi stands against the wall and takes out a dozen paper talismans.

The giant comb makes a U-turn mid-air and swings at them from above. The talismans in Chu Shuzhi's hand fly out like throwing darts and stick precisely to the densely packed knives. But perhaps he picked the wrong talismans, because the object is completely unaffected, and comes slashing down with a chilling gust.

Zhao Yunlan's gun slides into his hand.

Nobody has seen it coming, but at this instant, the slow-witted Guo Changcheng finally realises the situation, and lets out an inhuman shriek. "Mommy!!!"



A blast of flames shoots out from his 'stun baton': three metres of intense heat. The power of the fire is like a gas explosion. Zhao Yunlan and Chu Shuzhi dodge at the same time, and the blazing jet whooshes towards the dozens of blades. The giant comb quivers in the fiery vortex and eventually melts into a liquid, splashing onto the ground with hissing noises.

For a minute, nobody speaks.

A long time passes before Chu Shuzhi stiffly turns his neck, looks at Guo Changcheng and exclaims from the bottom of his heart, "You're so badass."

Guo Changcheng's mind has gone blank in pure terror, and his heart is still thundering. He desperately wishes for some sedatives. When he hears Chu Shuzhi, a million emotions surge up inside of him.

"I thought you just sealed an earthbound spirit into a stun baton; a resentful spirit that feeds on fear and converts it to energy." Chu Shuzhi turns towards the Chief, shivering a little. "What... what did you do to make that thing?"

Zhao Yunlan's expression switches from astonished to pompous at the speed of light. He adjusts his clothes, and says seriously, "It's illegal to imprison spirits. I'm a decent, law-abiding civil servant, why would I blatantly break the law?"

Chu Shuzhi has nothing to say to that.

"In fact, it contains the shattered souls of a few hundred executed ghosts. Most of them I got from the Ghost Slayer, and some I exchanged with Underworld guards for spirit money. Then I mixed the souls with Samadhi<sup>49</sup> True Fire..."

Chu Shuzhi is having a nervous breakdown. "And where the hell did you get the fire?"

"Last year I captured an escaped Bifang<sup>50</sup> bird, and I borrowed its flames to light a cigarette. And then I preserved the spark."

Chu Shuzhi is speechless. He extends an arm to help Guo Changcheng get up, and says feebly, "Never mind, let's keep going."

He has a gangster Chief who makes friends with good and evil and all sorts of beings from the three realms. He's afraid that in his entire life, by normal means, he'll never achieve his wish of beating him up... but perhaps this glorious and arduous mission will fall to his comrade and office mascot Guo Changcheng.

Zhao Yunlan smiles, and is about to remind them to be careful, when a long whistling sound comes from far away, and a cloud of fluorescent grey smoke floats over and lands in Zhao Yunlan's hand. The shining cloud disappears and a letter materialises: a pitch black envelope, blood-red words, and a familiar scent.

Chu Shuzhi's expression turns tense, and he takes a step backwards. Zhao Yunlan is afraid Guo Changcheng might lose control again, and walks forward a little on purpose to avoid that troublemaker.

Chu Shuzhi asks, "Is it from the Ghost Slayer?"

"Yeah." Zhao Yunlan rips open the envelope, but what's written in the letter puts a frown on his face.

The Ghost Slayer never has a lot to say, but he would normally at least start with greetings and unimportant formalities, as if he wanted to ask about all your distant relatives, before he says what he's actually writing to say in just a few words. Perhaps that's called the subtlety of an accomplished gentleman. But this time, the letter is just one sentence, the writing scribbled like a sticky note: 'Danger, do not proceed, turn back at once.'

Chu Shuzhi asks, "Why would the Ghost Slayer send his letter here; what's wrong?"

Zhao Yunlan folds the letter and puts it in his pocket without saying anything.

The Ghost Slayer usually sends his letters to the SIU office. Unless it's extremely urgent, they don't follow Zhao Yunlan anywhere else to fall right into his hands. After all, the Ghost Slayer prefers not to be seen, and the same applies to his letters.

What's happening now?

How does the Ghost Slayer know where Zhao Yunlan is?

Zhao Yunlan stays perfectly calm on the outside, but his mind goes round and round thinking of all sorts of possibilities. He hesitates, and says to Chu Shuzhi, "Lao Chu, please take him back to join up again with Lin Jing and the others."

"What?"

Guo Changcheng asks, "We're not going to find Wang Zheng anymore?"

"I'll go alone; you guys go back now." Zhao Yunlan pats Guo Changcheng on the shoulder. "Hold on to the baton, and be careful on your way back. Destroy the ritual site on the mountain with Lin Jing, and keep an eye on Shen Wei and his students. Wait for the rescue team to clear the road."

Chu Shuzhi has an uneasy feeling. "You're going alone?"

Zhao Yunlan nods without saying a word.

Chu Shuzhi frowns, but takes Guo Changcheng's hand decisively, "Let's go."

Guo Changcheng still wants to say something. "But..."

"But what, don't waste time. Our Chief is in a hurry to get things done and go back to his boyfriend. Now come on." He pulls the reluctant Guo Changcheng, who keeps looking back at Zhao Yunlan with a worried expression, out of the cave.

Zhao Yunlan holds the torch in his armpit, his leather-gloved hands in his pockets, watching the two leave. Once they leave his line of sight and the sound of a closing door is heard, he keeps walking.

Suddenly, the grey smoke from earlier reappears and solidifies into a skeleton the size of a five-year-old. The skeleton blocks his way with arms wide open.

"Oh, you're a very small puppet. Did the Ghost Slayer send you?" Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrows.

Perhaps because of how small it is, the puppet's black eye sockets seem to look very innocent. It doesn't seem to understand what Zhao Yunlan is saying, but it continues to block his way.

Zhao Yunlan rubs his chin... he never thought that the quiet Ghost Slayer actually knew him that well. If he had sent a giant skeleton, Zhao Yunlan would've busted his way through by force. But this small creature doesn't speak, and it's so tiny and fragile that Zhao Yunlan doesn't want to hurt it.

Zhao Yunlan examines the determined little puppet. "You're not gonna move away, are you?"

The puppet twitches its mouth and cackles.

Zhao Yunlan shakes his head. He raises his leg and steps over the small creature in one stride.

The small thing has yet to realise what's happening, it turns its head following Zhao Yunlan's movements, and its skull almost falls off. It finally realises that Zhao Yunlan is already walking ahead.

The small puppet scrambles after him and grabs hold of Zhao Yunlan's clothes, not letting him go.

Zhao Yunlan keeps walking with the skeleton attached to him... the small thing isn't heavy after all.

If it had eyes, it would probably be crying anxiously.

As he heads onward, the smell of decay grows stronger and stronger, the air more and more humid. Worn-out old stairs stretch downward, getting narrower and narrower. Zhao Yunlan doesn't want the skeleton getting in his way, so in the end he picks it up like a child and puts it onto his shoulder. He looks at his watch.

At first glance, the revealing mirror is strangely calm.

Zhao Yunlan stares at it for two seconds, then stops walking abruptly when he realises that the hands are going backwards!

No... not all of them are. The second hand is going counterclockwise, but the minute hand is going clockwise, and the hour hand is at twelve o'clock. There seems to be a strange force drawing the three hands together.

Finally, they all meet at twelve and stop dead.

Zhao Yunlan wipes some mud off the cave wall and sniffs it.

"Maybe it's an illusion," Zhao Yunlan murmurs, to himself or to the mini skeleton, "but I feel like I'm buried alive."



## Chapter 36

The small puppet cackles and pokes at Zhao Yunlan's cheek with its tiny finger bones. Then it points towards a nearby wall and cackles again.

Zhao Yunlan lifts the torch and finds some writings on the wall.

"Well, you may not have eyes but your sight is good... that's Hanga language." Zhao Yunlan moves closer and touches the wall lightly. "No... strictly speaking, the Hanga didn't have their own language; this must be a special kind of spell."

The small skeleton says, "Ga... ga...?"

"Don't ask me, I'm not a multilingual dictionary, gods know what that means." Zhao Yunlan moves in even closer and murmurs, "But I do know that in Hanga culture, round shapes were considered benign and peaceful, whereas cornered shapes were considered evil. For instance a triangle imprisons spirits, and I saw an octagon too but I haven't yet figured out what it means..."

He runs his fingers across the writings and finds an octagonal symbol.

"There it is," Zhao Yunlan says calmly. "Great, now comes the scary part."

A huge explosion interrupts him, and the entire cave shakes. Zhao Yunlan almost loses his balance, and the small puppet screeches as it clutches his collar and hair. A fire dragon comes rushing at them, howling; Zhao Yunlan holds on to the wall with one hand and to the little skeleton with the other, the blazing light painting his face red.

His pupils reflect the dancing flames—oddly, they are scorching cold. He pats the head of the little skeleton that is desperately clinging to him. "Don't hang on to my clothes, get into my watch if you're scared."

Without hesitation, the little puppet forgets all about its master's orders, turns into a cloud of grey smoke, and jumps into his watch. The next moment, a wave of heat engulfs him so fast, he can't dodge it.

Zhao Yunlan is clutching a paper talisman in his hand, but it doesn't burn in the fire; he doesn't feel the heat either.

Zhao Yunlan hesitates for a moment, then calmly puts away the talisman. He looks up at the fire raging tall, sweeping the entire cave clean; all he can see is flames, but they don't touch him. As the fire wears away, the octagonal symbol falls off the wall along with a layer of mud.

He quickly catches it, puts it in an empty cigarette case and stuffs it in his pocket. Then, larger pieces of mud start to peel off the wall, and a mural slowly emerges.

Perhaps due to its age, most of it is obscure. The symbols on it seem very random, with no overall vision; maybe an archaeologist could figure it out, but not Zhao Yunlan. He studies the mural until his eyes almost cross, and still he has no clue what it's about.

He finally loses interest and walks on. But suddenly, he thinks of something; he turns, looking at the wall from a distance. He shines his torch light at the top of the painting, then forty five degrees downwards, three o'clock position, then forty five degrees downwards...

He realises that the mural makes a giant octagon, and in each corner of it there's another small octagon.



Zhao Yunlan stares at it, then starts rummaging in his pockets: his wallet contains some change, credit cards and receipts, and finally, a scruffy piece of paper, torn out of an ancient book.

It's the page about Luobula restriction magic from the *Ancient Scroll of Dark Magic*. For some reason, he didn't show it to Chu Shuzhi.

On it is a drawing of a hideous, fanged monster with six arms and only one leg, each of these, plus its head, pointing to one corner of an octagon. The monster looks ferocious and menacing, and its wide-open jaws hold a mountain. Its left chest has a black octagonal symbol on it.

"The mountain is in its mouth, and that thing is in its heart..." Zhao Yunlan muses. He sticks the old map he also carries around onto the wall; then he tapes the drawing of the monster on it and slowly rotates the map, until South faces upwards. He marks a line with his fingernail, connecting the monster's mouth to its heart and finally to the deepest part of the valley.

The strange fire in the valley, the skulls at the mountaintop, and the dark magic of an extinct tribe... these things all seem to hold a deeper and darker secret.

And why did Wang Zheng run off here on her own? Why is she so obsessed with her centuries-old corpse?

Zhao Yunlan has a bad feeling about this. When he finds Wang Zheng, he'll lock her in a dark room for a month, that troublesome suicidal girl!

He heads deeper into the cave, which keeps getting narrower and narrower. He lowers his head and keeps walking until he thinks his spine will stay permanently hunched over, and only then does he arrive at the end.

There's another door, and it has a six-armed, one-legged monster engraved on it - exactly like the one on the page from the book he brought with him; except this one looks terrified.

Zhao Yunlan slowly reaches out. As his palm touches the door, he feels his chest tighten as if he were having a heart attack. But he doesn't hesitate and pushes the door open. He finds himself on the edge of a cliff halfway up the mountain; below him is the mysterious valley.

He feels as though he were standing in the middle of a stormy ocean with heavy waves crashing against his chest, suffocating him.

It's still day, but clouds enshroud the sun and not a single ray of light can pierce their dense cover. Zhao Yunlan pauses for a moment, then walks forward.

With the very first step, he seems to touch something.

A silent sigh comes from the depths of the earth, spreading in ripples like water from the mountains of the Hanga people.

There's something in this valley, something... extraordinary.

Zhao Yunlan walks towards it and the air gets thinner and thinner; the force that clutches and squashes his chest grows stronger and stronger. He feels like there's a vise around his temples, and he can only hear the rapid pumping of his pulse. His vision darkens, and he slowly adjusts his breathing... if he keeps breathing too hard he'll quickly be exhausted.

His intuition tells him that if there's something Wang Zheng hasn't forgotten in all these years since she died, it wouldn't be her corpse, it would be this.

The small skeleton hiding in his watch sticks its skull out, its jaws chattering. It seems to be saying something, but it's clearly scared; it

wants to stop Zhao Yunlan, but it doesn't dare come out.

Zhao Yunlan pushes it back into his watch and his expression turns darker as he moves forward against the overwhelming pressure. He takes out three yellow paper talismans, different from the ones he used before; they each have 'Guardian' written on them. If the black cat were here, he would recognise them: these are the legendary Guardian Order talismans.

Unsure what else to do, he just keeps walking. Every three steps he takes, one of the talismans burns up, and as the final one disappears, there are three sounds of a whip cracking. Out of thin air, a long whip appears in Zhao Yunlan's hand. It seems to be alive, its tip extending straight ahead and pulling him along... until he sees a white form that is about to melt away in the daylight.

Zhao Yunlan's face darkens. With a flick of his wrist he coils the whip around the white ghost and pulls her in towards him. Wang Zheng's plastic body is long gone and her spirit is incredibly feeble. She looks at him with the calm gaze of a dying person.

"Dammit, I see you've lost your mind." Grimacing, Zhao Yunlan yanks her in and stuffs her whole body into his watch, cursing all the while. His heart aches like it's about to explode. "What a fucking terrible place!"

Now he has caught Wang Zheng, he wants to head back immediately. But just then something else attracts his attention; something which makes him look back to where Wang Zheng has been standing.

He sees a colossal stone monument, dozens of metres tall, towering into the sky. It's entirely black, thicker at the top and thinner at the bottom, like a gigantic wedge stuck into the ground. At the bottom is a ruined ritual site. Hanga spells, perhaps incantations, are engraved all over the tumbled altar stones, and the offering table below is filled with freshly-prepared blood sacrifices.

The moment Zhao Yunlan sees the huge tower, a million faces emerge on it, tightly packed together, every single one of them wailing in agony. Deafening screams pierce his ears; sharp shrieks made by millions of people at the same time, at the top of their voices.

Zhao Yunlan feels as if a large boulder is crushing his chest. There's a sharp buzz in his head and pain spreads instantly throughout his body. He bends over and vomits blood; he struggles to stand up straight again, but he can't feel his limbs. His knees buckle, and he collapses to the ground.

For a few seconds, he sees and hears nothing. His chest is throbbing in agony, until a burst of ringing in his ears turns him numb.

*I can't pass out here*, he thinks. With his bloodied hand, he resolutely draws the knife hidden in his trouser leg and slashes at his other palm.

A freezing cold hand stops him. He's pulled into someone's arms. Amidst the smell of blood he picks up a familiar scent... the faint and cool aroma that comes from the Underworld.

Is it... the Ghost Slayer?

Zhao Yunlan's knife falls to the ground. His thoughts fade, and he falls unconscious.



## Chapter 37

The Ghost Slayer's dark cloak is like a fog no light can penetrate. A long trail of thick smoke whips up and engulfs the two, rising into the sky. The shroud of darkness blocks out everything outside.

He carries Zhao Yunlan in his arms, and shouts at the wristwatch, "Come out!"

The small puppet floats upwards, its disproportionately big skull drooping. The Ghost Slayer glares at it, and beckons it back into his sleeve. "Come back in here."

The little puppet obediently shrinks into a rush of grey smoke that rolls into a ball and back into his sleeve.

Wang Zheng comes out of the watch, as well, takes half a step back, and looks anxiously at Zhao Yunlan.

The Ghost Slayer gives her a cold glare, his eyes sombre and frightening; Wang Zheng can't help but shiver.

After a long moment, the Ghost Slayer looks away. He sits on the ground, carefully shifting the man in his arms into a more comfortable position. "You work for him. It is not up to me to judge whether your actions were right or wrong. Sit down."

Wang Zheng dares not sit too close; she hesitates, and sits as far away as she can while still remaining inside the pillar of smoke.

The Ghost Slayer seems to be afraid of getting Zhao Yunlan dirty, though Zhao Yunlan has already managed to make quite a mess of himself. He carefully sets his weapon aside, and Wang Zheng realises that his blade is dark with blood.

Then a pale white hand emerges from a black sleeve and gently wipes away the blood at the corner of Zhao Yunlan's mouth. As his fingertips pass over Zhao Yunlan's lips, he pauses imperceptibly, looking as if he were about to lean in and kiss him. He acts like he's holding a piece of fragile and precious treasure instead of the ill-tempered and crude Guardian.

Wang Zheng's eyes widen in shock.

A long time later, Zhao Yunlan finally wakes up. He finds his head resting against someone's shoulder. He grimaces, feeling as if he has thrown up all his internal organs and collapsed like an empty sack.

He struggles to open his eyes and looks at the Ghost Slayer. "You..."

He only gets out one word before a cold finger presses lightly against his lips. The Ghost Slayer places his hand on the middle of his back and says softly, "Don't talk, focus."

A surge of soothing, cooling energy flows out of the Ghost Slayer's palm. Zhao Yunlan shivers a little, but he doesn't shrink away. He closes his eyes and simply lets the Ghost Slayer take care of him.

The cold comes from the vicious and brutal nature of the Ghost Slayer's origin, but Zhao Yunlan finds himself slowly calming down under his hands.

Zhao Yunlan can't help but admire the Ghost Slayer; ever since the Guardian Order passed on to him, the Ghost Slayer has always worked with him in times of the worst crisis. Throughout these years, Zhao Yunlan has never seen him act impolitely or lose control.

The Ghost Slayer always seems perfectly poised, modest, and extremely restrained: his brutal nature has always been suppressed, and not a hint of it can be seen.

Ultimate restraint can sometimes be employed to achieve ultimate freedom: if a person has ruthlessly suppressed his true nature for thousands of years, then on one hand, he lives in pain, but on the other, he's a truly remarkable man.

Over time, Zhao Yunlan's agony fades away. He opens his eyes and sits up. "Thank you so much. You arrived in the nick of time... I guess my luck has turned for the better again."

The Ghost Slayer reluctantly lets go of him and moves aside a little. He says politely, "It is my pleasure... but the Guardian should not have ignored my warning."

"It's all because of that stupid girl." Zhao Yunlan points at Wang Zheng, whose head is still drooping. "I was worried sick. She works for me after all; I can't just let one of my people die."

His face darkens. "Get your ass over here!"

Wang Zheng silently floats over a little, and Zhao Yunlan's whip lashes towards her. She squeezes her eyes shut, but the whip doesn't touch her; it only snaps along the ground beside her, leaving a deep scar.

"Open your eyes. I never beat up women. Now come closer." The whip transforms into a paper talisman, which floats like a feather into Zhao Yunlan's hand. A corner of it is blood-stained. "Not even the Guardian Order is going to get you to listen now, am I right?"

Wordlessly, Wang Zheng kneels down in front of him.

But Zhao Yunlan isn't moved at all. "Get back up, don't give me that. What the hell are you kneeling down for, my wallet is still in the car, no red envelopes for you."

Wang Zheng bites her lips.



Zhao Yunlan glares at her furiously and takes out a cigarette and lighter. A hand silently snatches the cigarette away.

He rubs his nose. He feels like something similar happened before.

"I checked your files." Zhao Yunlan rubs his fingers, not knowing what to do with them. "You died in 1713, the second year of the Hanga civil war. So what happened then? Where is this body you're looking for? Did you prepare the offerings at the bottom of that pillar just now? What's that thing?"

The Ghost Slayer interrupts. "It's not a pillar, it's called the Awl of Mountains and Rivers."

*That sounds familiar.* Zhao Yunlan pauses for a thought, and frowns. "One of the Four Mystical Artefacts?"

The Ghost Slayer nods. "The Guardian knows a lot."

First the Sundial of Reincarnation, then the Awl of Mountains and Rivers. The Four Mystical Artefacts have long been lost and scattered across the universe; it's not like they're vegetables that can be found in every marketplace. Coming across two of them in just half a year, Zhao Yunlan feels like he should have bought a lottery ticket instead.

It makes him engage in conspiracy theories, and in a flash, countless causes and consequences come together: the inexplicably neat office when he returned to Dragon City University; the hungry ghost that chased after Li Qian; the missing Sundial of Reincarnation; the wanted criminal demon beasts; and... the sudden warning from the Ghost Slayer.

Seriously, he asks the most important question at hand. "What's the Awl of Mountains and Rivers?"

"People often say 'the gods and the spirits control life and death', but that's not true. Ever since the dawn of time, there has been Good and Evil. The earliest judgement was engraved onto the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, to tell Good from Evil. This great Awl was formed from the essence of a million mountains and rivers, and it extends from the Nine Heavens down to the depths of the Underworld. On it are written the details of all the Eighteen Levels of Hell, and it is the basis for the various judgements in the *Book of Life and Death*. Ever since the creation of the Awl, people have believed that the mountains and rivers have spirits."

The Ghost Slayer pauses for a moment, and adds, "The Awl of Mountains and Rivers was first created for suppression. Over time, millions of evil spirits have been bound inside it. After it was lost, no-one would have thought that humans would make use of it to enslave their own kind for eternity. Other people wouldn't be affected by it, but you..." The Ghost Slayer hesitates, and he rarely does. He continues, "You were born with an unstable soul, so you were affected greatly by it."

Zhao Yunlan has never heard of that before. "My soul's unstable? My soul's just fine, how's it unstable?"

The Ghost Slayer stays silent for a moment; then he says, "A human has Samadhi True Fire in three places: head and both shoulders. Your left shoulder is missing a fire. In the old times that was called a 'ghost-touched shoulder'. It causes instability in your soul; so please be extremely careful in the future."

Zhao Yunlan frowns and looks at his left shoulder. But he dismisses it quickly and asks, "So the Hanga used the Awl of Mountains and Rivers to create their Luobula restriction magic?"

The Ghost Slayer nods. "They would behead people and burn their bodies, and use dark magic to trap their souls inside the valley. The

Awl would absorb the souls, and then they could control the dead using their skulls."

Zhao Yunlan points at Wang Zheng. "What about her?"

The Ghost Slayer looks at Wang Zheng, who shivers as his gaze seems to pierce through her soul and look into all her past lives. "She was beheaded, but it seems that someone preserved her head and body properly, so her soul was never imprisoned in the Awl."

Wang Zheng smiles bitterly. "Yes, I was immature back then. I died with a grudge, and took possession of the body of a living person. That's how the previous Guardian captured me and took me in under the Guardian Order. 'Wang Zheng' wasn't my birth name; it's the name of the girl I possessed... My real name is Gelan. I was the daughter of the tribe leader who died in the civil war."

Zhao Yunlan realises with annoyance that his SIU is full of people born into rich and powerful families.

Wang Zheng continues, "The leader of the rebels was called Sang Zan. His mother was my mother's maid. Our tribe didn't have normal citizens, you were either royal or a slave. So Sang Zan naturally was a slave as well. But he was brave and capable, so he stood out among them. My father appointed him to be in charge of the war horses. He was admired by many."

She laughs bitterly. "But in our tribe, no matter how capable you were, if you were a slave, your life was worth no more than that of a family's dog, cow, pig or sheep. You could be bought, sold and killed at will. Sang Zan was handsome and rich; but he had no personal dignity after all. At one point, my father got a young slave girl pregnant, and my mother was furious... that slave girl was Sang Zan's younger sister. My mother took her anger out on Sang Zan's mother and found some trivial reason to have her beheaded. Sang Zan's father was whipped to death by my elder brother. His sister... well, she eventually hanged herself."

Zhao Yunlan starts chewing some beef jerky, and comments, "Your dad was a prick."

The Ghost Slayer, seeing he's in a foul mood, coughs and asks, "There used to be a sacrificial stone tablet at the bottom of the Awl onto which tribute was placed; and engraved on it was a list of all the imprisoned souls. I see that the stone remains, but the list is gone. Did that happen during the war?"

Wang Zheng nods. "Sang Zan led his followers to victory, and eventually arrived at the forbidden site... that is, at the Awl of Mountains and Rivers here. He said he wanted everyone in the tribe to live equally and with dignity, so he used a large file to destroy the list of names. The tribe leader... my father, mother and brother, the rest of the royal families, and all their followers and soldiers were hanged in the watch house at the mountaintop. From then, the Hanga abolished royalty and slavery."

"What about you?" Zhao Yunlan asks. "You weren't executed, because you secretly helped Sang Zan, right?"

Wang Zheng drops her head. "I'd known him since we were little. When my father sent people after him, I was the one who hid him... I really just didn't want him to die; I didn't think the war would turn out like it did."

## Chapter 38

Zhao Yunlan frowns at her. "You're not going to be sick, are you?"

Wang Zheng stares straight at the ground and doesn't answer. She always seems dazed when her eyes fixate on a spot. After a while, she says softly, "I was young, not even seventeen. I didn't know anything. I was naive and foolish. I only saw what was happening right in front of me, and I only saw one path to cling to<sup>51</sup>. I... Sang Zan and I were childhood friends; though he was a slave, I regarded him as family. Dad wanted to kill him, and I... of course I didn't want that."

"You hid him, like a schoolgirl hiding a love letter from her parents," Zhao Yunlan says impolitely.

A faint smile emerges but quickly vanishes from Wang Zheng's face. "I guess. At the time, I blamed my father; he did wrong and brought shame on me, he... he was our great leader, how could he be so shameless?"

Zhao Yunlan stays silent, still wearing a grim expression, but his gaze softens subtly. Wang Zheng sighs after a long while. "Is there nowhere in this world where everyone is free, where everyone is equal?"

Nobody answers. After long moments, Zhao Yunlan suddenly says, "There is."

Wang Zheng and the Ghost Slayer both turn towards him. Zhao Yunlan's lips are still stained with bright red blood marks; his face is very pale. Against his dark grey shirt collar he looks wan, but the contrast to his eyes is striking: his eyes are always bright, like nothing in the world can extinguish their light.

He pauses for a moment, then says slowly, "In death."

The Ghost Slayer's face is still obscured by swirling dark mist, but hearing this, he says, "Wouldn't that mean there is no hope? What is the purpose of living then? The Lord Guardian is too pessimistic."

"You aren't considering the essence of the matter, Your Honour." Zhao Yunlan looks up calmly. "What's fair and what's equal? If someone considers himself fairly treated, that means there must be others who feel that they're not. If someone is starving, for them equality would mean being fed as well as others. When everyone is adequately fed, equality will mean having the same dignity as others. Even if everyone lives with dignity, there will still be idiots who believe themselves superior to others, and they would never quit until death, would they? Equal or not, isn't that all up to each person to decide?"

The Ghost Slayer is lost for words for a moment, then he laughs lightly. "That's a preposterous argument.."

Zhao Yunlan laughs too, and changes the subject. "Sang Zan won the war, killed your dad, erased the names on the altar, and abolished slavery. So what happened then?"

"Afterwards, for matters big or small, the eldest member represented the whole family to raise concerns and vote for solutions, and the majority view would be adopted," Wang Zheng says. "Sang Zan suggested this system. He wasn't educated, but he knew what the people wanted. It's like what people call democracy now. I guess humans have always wanted the same things."

Zhao Yunlan bends one leg, clasping his knee with both hands, and listens to what she has to say. He's slouching in a laid-back fashion, but his words still pierce like knives, every single one aimed to strike at the heart. "That's how you died, right?"

Wang Zheng is caught off-guard and stunned into silence. Her gaze turns very sad.

When everyone thinks she won't speak, she suddenly says, "I was... at that time I had nowhere else to stay but at Sang Zan's. But I couldn't do any work: when I was little, my mother only ever taught me how to dress up and order the slaves to do everything else. I couldn't hunt, and I couldn't even take care of house work... Then, a girl in the tribe wanted to marry Sang Zan, her father came for matchmaking, but Sang Zan turned him down. The girl was devastated and ran up to the mountains on her own. When they found her she was dead; she'd fallen down the hillside and banged her head on a rock. Her father despised me, and he convinced a lot of people that since I was the leader's daughter, I must know magic. He said I was lucky they'd forgiven me and let me live, but I was still unrepentant, and I was lazy and had too much power over their hero Sang Zan. He said I cast a magic spell out of jealousy, that killed his daughter. So... so they decided I should be executed."

Wang Zheng's shoulders suddenly tremble. She once believed wholeheartedly that her father was wrong: people should not have been enslaved, they were humans too, they didn't deserve to live with shame and be controlled by others. She used to be like Sang Zan, wishing that the people could all live equally, freely and happily.

But the people she so sympathised with and loved turned out to loathe her.

"The girl's father led the tribe to vote by raising their hands: those who didn't were abstaining or didn't want me to be killed, and those who did wanted me beheaded..."

When she says 'beheaded', her voice cracks and she starts crying.

That day, a big crowd gathered, all looking rather pleased. Rows after rows of raised hands packed tightly in a cluster. From the platform on which she stood, they looked like claws of evil spirits

emerging from the deepest river of the Underworld. Everyone raised their hands. They glared at the tied-up girl... cold, numb, stupid and cruel..

Astonishingly, they reached a unanimous agreement to kill her and cut off her head.

Even the brightest of hearts, burning with a thousand lights, must be extinguished until not even ashes remain.

Nobody remembered what she had done... or maybe they thought she'd done it with an ulterior motive anyway.

Tears fall in large drops from Wang Zheng's eyes, turning to mist as they hit the ground, and evaporating into thin air. Her figure grows weaker... she died over three hundred years ago, so she shouldn't have tears; but now her heart is broken beyond repair, and her soul is burning up.

"Don't cry." Zhao Yunlan gently takes her chin in his hand. He wipes the tears off her face and sticks a soul-stabilising talisman to her forehead. The crying stops, and she stares at Zhao Yunlan with her innocent eyes. Zhao Yunlan's shrewd gaze turns gentle, and Wang Zheng seems to be dazed by it.

Zhao Yunlan holds out his watch, and lowers his voice. "Come on in."

Wang Zheng suddenly has a feeling that Zhao Yunlan already knows everything about her.

She's still dazed while a gentle but irresistible force pulls her into the revealing mirror. Zhao Yunlan says, "I'll let you out when it's dark."

Wang Zheng disappears. Zhao Yunlan and the Ghost Slayer are left, lost for words.



Zhao Yunlan closes his eyes, exhausted.

The Ghost Slayer stays quiet for a moment, then pats his shoulder. "Don't sleep just yet. The Awl of Rivers and Mountains hurt you. If you sleep, your soul that has just stabilised might weaken again. You can rest later... does your chest still hurt?"

Zhao Yunlan rubs between his eyebrows hard and says hoarsely, "I'm fine, it's just that stupid girl's damn drugs. I've been feeling dizzy all day."

"How about I escort you back first, then return for the Awl of Mountains and Rivers."

Zhao Yunlan waves his hand, and forces himself to look energetic. Finally, he can't help but plead, "Can I have a cigarette?"

He treats the Ghost Slayer's silence as acquiescence and swiftly lights up, smoking deeply like an addict. The Ghost Slayer can't even smell a whiff of secondhand smoke; every last bit of smoke is sucked into Zhao Yunlan's lungs. It seems to refresh him. "I'm fine, really, I treat vomiting blood as detoxing. I just didn't know what that thing was and I was caught a little off-guard. You don't have to walk me back, Your Honour, taking the Awl is the priority. Last time someone else got to the Sundial first, so don't delay because of me."

The Ghost Slayer freezes. "Last time... you saw?"

Zhao Yunlan shoots him a baffled look. "I'm not blind? But the Underworld put out an order to kill demon beasts. I wonder who's behind all this, who would dare challenge you like that?"

The Ghost Slayer is silent for a moment, and Zhao Yunlan realises he's put him in an awkward position. He says, "Oh, I'm not looking for answers from you. It's just that I'm in charge of the living world, so if it's ever going to affect us here, it would be nice if you could warn me in advance, Your Honour."

The Ghost Slayer agrees quietly. Zhao Yunlan stands up, puts the cigarette out in the snow, and seems more lively again. He pulls out a scruffy paper talisman, crumples it into a ball and eats it. "Damn, so hard to chew. Let's go, shall we, Your Honour?"

The Ghost Slayer nods, and retracts the smoke barrier; the Awl of Mountains and Rivers reappears in front of them.

Though Zhao Yunlan is chewing on a soul-stabilising talisman, he still feels the soul-crushing hostility emanating from the Awl of Mountains and Rivers. He puts a hand into his pocket and stands straight, his chin raised, facing the colossal monument. He realises that the cross-section of the Awl is an octagon. It penetrates the ground sharply, all the way down to the centre of the Earth.

The Ghost Slayer walks forward, stands still, palms pressed together, and after a moment, whips up a fearsome storm. The gale is tearing at his hood and dark cloak, but he remains poised.

The Ghost Slayer bellows, "Souls of the Mountains!"

The Awl of Mountains and Rivers trembles. Then the ground. After that, the snowy mountains tremble as well. From the depths of the valleys and hills comes a rumbling sound like thunder, as if a god trapped under the icy rocks is being awakened, letting out a terrifying cry that darkens the skies.

Suddenly there's a flash of phantom shapes around him. Zhao Yunlan struggles to keep his eyes open in the gusts, and what he sees is like an illusion streaking through the air.

He recognizes Wang Zheng in her teens, innocent and naive. A handsome young man in rags stands on high, looking back at her with a bloodied face and a genuine and pure smile.

Then he roars, and swings a giant iron shovel at the stone monument on the altar. At his feet, the hillside is stained blood-red and littered with corpses.

Those who are still alive look up intently at his every movement.

After destroying the stone monument, the man stays still for a while, then suddenly starts shouting in a rough voice. Zhao Yunlan doesn't understand the language, but he knows what it means.

Covered in blood and mud, the man emerges victorious; but there's no joy in his face, only grief and anger. After his tribe has been imprisoned for a thousand years, his first breath of fresh air almost chokes him to tears.

The silent crowd eventually joins in; the howling and weeping of men echoes in the valley.

The mirage disappears abruptly, and the Awl of Mountains and Rivers gradually rises up from the ground. The Ghost Slayer points another finger. "Spirits of the Rivers!"

Zhao Yunlan stands motionless, the black shadow of the Awl reflecting in his irises. His eyes redden from the howling wind, and he puts his hand on the watch, comforting the soul of the girl trapped within, consoling her in her eternal loneliness and sadness.

At this instant, a shriek pierces the air, assaulting his ears. Zhao Yunlan lowers his head inadvertently, feeling dizzy again. The screaming gets higher and higher, louder and louder, ringing in his ears like fingernails scratching at his internal organs.

The screeching continues to rise and soon explodes out of control; Zhao Yunlan thinks he may be about to vomit.

Not far from him, the Ghost Slayer summons his wall of smoke again, blocking out all noises. The Awl of Mountains and Rivers

reverts to its original form and falls back to the ground. Zhao Yunlan tastes blood: he realises he has bitten his tongue.

"What was that?"

The usually calm and poised Ghost Slayer finally shows a sign of worry. "I was reckless; this must be handled with caution. That was the wailing of ten thousand ghosts."



## Chapter 39

The Ghost Slayer sits down in place, and a moment later, he recovers his usual composure. "The Awl of Mountains and Rivers has been standing here for thousands, possibly millions of years. The girl said Sang Zan cleared the stone tablet on the altar, so logically the spirits imprisoned within should have been freed; I didn't expect... ghosts normally cannot cry. These ghosts were screaming and wailing at the risk of shattering their own souls. Neither of us can withstand the force of their weeping; even mountains could crumble."

Zhao Yunlan puts his hands behind his back and stands behind him in silence.

The Ghost Slayer says, "This is rather surprising."

Before Zhao Yunlan can reply, his revealing mirror flashes and a sudden rush of white bursts out, lunging towards the Awl with determination.

But Wang Zheng doesn't get far—her body hasn't even left the watch entirely when a transparent string like spider silk suddenly springs from Zhao Yunlan's hand and tightly secures her in place.

Wang Zheng freezes for a moment. She looks back, and they lock eyes with each other. Wang Zheng's eyes are brimming with tears, but she can't cry due to the talisman on her. Zhao Yunlan shows no emotion, appearing quite unreasonable.

"You ran away once on my watch. If I let you run away a second time, I might as well chop my head off and give it to you for a football," he says coldly.

Wang Zheng silently retreats a bit, the spider silk still restraining her.

Zhao Yunlan glares at her, and Wang Zheng instinctively lowers her head in alarm. Eventually, the Ghost Slayer gently pulls him back, and advises calmly, "Guardian, compose yourself; it's best not to get angry."

Zhao Yunlan looks at him... he can reprimand his staff all he wants, but he has to show the Ghost Slayer some respect. So he says to Wang Zheng, as calmly as he can, "Do you think if you sacrifice yourself to the Awl of Mountains and Rivers you can appease the spirits? I don't get it—do you really think sincerity is the key to success, or do you just want to become a ghost snack?" At first he kept his tone down, but he gets angrier and angrier and eventually yells, "Are you fucking stupid!?"

The red line around Wang Zheng's neck grows brighter, and the talisman on her forehead flickers as she trembles. Her appearance is almost comical, like a silly zombie girl from a third-rate horror film, but nobody is laughing.

Zhao Yunlan stops yelling; he has finally vented all his anger and begins to calm down. He sits down beside the Ghost Slayer on the ground, and mercifully says to Wang Zheng, "You sit, too."

The binding silk swivels in the air and transforms into a silvery chair, just big enough for one person to sit on.

Perhaps too much has happened in Wang Zheng's life and afterlife. She doesn't have the unrestrained exuberance of the ethnic minorities in the Northwest. She always seems depressed, silent, and withdrawn. Her dark hair hangs unmoving down beside her cheeks.

With much effort, Zhao Yunlan finally manages to speak in a mild tone. "There are some things that outsiders can easily guess the whole truth about. Do you know why that is?"

Wang Zheng quietly raises her eyes.

Zhao Yunlan sighs. "Because it's gonna happen no matter what; it's fate. You cannot stop fate."

Wang Zheng mutters, "You know?"

"I just understand people like Sang Zan," Zhao Yunlan says. "For centuries his people had been enslaved; old people would die with their children still in servitude. Nobody had ever dared to rebel. He was the first ever, so he must have felt great indignation. Such a brave, extraordinary man, he must have been fearless even in death, but he could not let anyone hurt his pride. And a man's pride has nothing to do with riches and fame; a man's most basic pride lies in being able to protect his wife and children, and provide those he loves with a stable life. Right?"

As the Ghost Slayer hears this, he can't help but ask, "Is this also the case for the Lord Guardian?"

"I cannot control fate." Zhao Yunlan cannot think of a reason why the Ghost Slayer would want to discuss something as trivial as this, so he just says, "But if someone willingly and devotedly follows me, takes care of me and worries about me, and I can't even protect them, then what kind of garbage am I? Would I deserve to be called human?"

The Ghost Slayer hides his hands in the sleeves and clenches his fists out of sight; he struggles to control his emotions. Eventually, he says in a low voice, "The Guardian has a deep sense of love and righteousness; one wonders what kind of person might have the honour to receive his feelings."

"Huh?" Zhao Yunlan is stunned by the compliment; it certainly sounds strange coming from the Ghost Slayer. He laughs. "Oh, don't flatter me, Your Honour, I'm getting goosebumps."



The Ghost Slayer laughs lightly, but doesn't reply, and only says, "For the sake of his tribe, Sang Zan bore a terrible crime, desperate to let his people live in equality and prosperity. And he succeeded—he made his seemingly unattainable wish a reality. But he cannot have anticipated what followed."

Zhao Yunlan says, "If I were him, and the person I loved died at the hands of the people I freed, under the rules I set, I would hate those people more than I hated the old tribe leader."

"More than that." The Ghost Slayer looks up and stares at the towering Awl through the smokescreen he has created. He says softly, "Not even hacking them to pieces with a thousand knives<sup>52</sup> would ease the hatred."

There is an eerie chill in his voice. Wang Zheng senses it and moves a little closer to Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan asks, "Did Sang Zan see your execution?"

Wang Zheng shakes her head. "They put him under house arrest. That girl's father said I had bewitched him and it was for his own good."

Zhao Yunlan thinks for a moment. "So Sang Zan collected and hid your body?"

Wang Zheng nods.

"So, when you said you wanted to come back for your body and be properly buried, that was a lie?"

Wang Zheng drops her head, and after a while, she nods.

Zhao Yunlan frowns at her for a moment; then he looks away and says stiffly, "Don't let there be a next time."

The Ghost Slayer sees that his attitude has softened, and interjects, "And then Sang Zan put your body into the water?"

Wang Zheng takes a deep breath, and says after a moment of silence, "Yes. Our tribe believed that the mountains represent imprisonment and suppression, whereas the rivers represent a thousand miles of light and freedom. When slaves or criminals died, they would be beheaded in the mountains. When royalty died, their bodies would be washed down the rivers. Sang Zan dug up my head in the night, and stole my body that was waiting for cremation. He took the head of the girl who died accidentally, and swapped the two bodies. Then, he sewed my head and body together, and placed me into the girl's shroud next to the river. He held me and cried all night. The next day, he watched as the people washed my body down the stream."

She raises her head and runs her fingers softly across the red line around her neck. The stitches are tightly sewn. Normally, it would appear frightening. Now, it just feels heartwrenching.

How did he feel when he was washing her face, when his fingers ran across her dead and pale profile, and when he had to sew her head and body together?

And perhaps, he never got the chance to tell her his true feelings that he always kept hidden.

How terribly ruthless time is; just a slight hesitation, and what you have is gone. You'll be left heartbroken, and there will be no turning back.

The two men beside her are silent, lost in their own thoughts.

"The river bore my body away but I never left," Wang Zheng says. "I watched him. And he became another person. Originally, three people took turns to initiate voting among the tribe: Sang Zan, the man who caused my execution, and a respected elder. Sang Zan

married the granddaughter of the elder, and they worked together to frame the third. Two years later, the people voted for his execution."

Zhao Yunlan takes out a cigarette, and sniffs it.

"Another year went by. The elder passed away. Everyone thought he died of old age, but I saw Sang Zan poisoning him." Wang Zheng's eyebrows twitch as if she still cannot believe the truth... poison is a coward's weapon; how did a brave warrior become a cunning villain using poison in secret?

"Then it was his wife, and his son who was still learning to walk... his own flesh and blood." Wang Zheng's translucent fingers clutch at her wispy white dress. "Every person he killed, he would secretly behead, bury their heads at the mountaintop, and put a rock in their corpse bags so that their bodies would sink to the bottom of the river instead of floating away. Eventually, nobody in the tribe could oppose him anymore, and they all followed him under the illusion that they were making decisions out of their own free will. He became the new leader."

An all-powerful leader who only wanted to destroy the tribe.

When internal conflict arose, Sang Zan would suppress it on the surface, but stoke the fires of uproar behind the scenes...

The once brave and righteous young man became a self-taught schemer; the young man who held the body of his lover and wept for an entire night became cold-blooded and dangerous... just as the dancing and singing people who only wanted to live a good life had all raised their hands and chopped off the head of an innocent girl, and even wished for her soul to be enslaved forever.

"Fifteen years after my death, civil war broke out again. The tribe turned against each other and divided into two forces. This war was even more brutal than the last. Corpses filled the valley, bloodied children weeping next to them. Vultures circled the air, attracted by

the smell of death... but they didn't swoop down, because Sang Zan led the rest of the people to the ritual site and started a fire. Standing in the flames, he pulled a switch under the stone tablet."

Wang Zheng says softly, "The stone tablet he'd once cleared had everyone's names engraved onto it again. The flames burned for a long time, scorching the entire valley. Only the Awl of Mountains and Rivers stood tall, like a pillar of shame..."

The ten thousand ghosts weren't wailing without reason.



## Chapter 40

Without sympathy, Zhao Yunlan interrupts her tragic reminiscence and rubs his palms. "No more talk about that past crap; what do we do now?"

The Ghost Slayer is silent. Wang Zheng moves her lips and is about to speak, but Zhao Yunlan points at her and says, "I didn't ask you, you keep your mouth shut."

"The Awl of Mountains and Rivers suppresses souls and spirits. Not only the souls of those who died unjustly, but any soul imprisoned within will eventually become resentful." The Ghost Slayer ponders, and says with composure, "In my view, there aren't many options available: either destroy this sacred Artefact, or forcefully suppress the souls within."

His words are quite subtle. Wang Zheng asks, bewildered, "Your Honour, what do you mean by that..."

Zhao Yunlan says, "He means that if we can't blow up the Awl, he'll have to slay all the souls inside and shatter them into pieces, to avoid future trouble."

Wang Zheng covers her mouth with her hand.

The Ghost Slayer shakes his head. "Execution without reason is unjust."

Then the only option left is to blow up the Awl of Mountains and Rivers.

The three are silent.

Zhao Yunlan sits on the ground and idly plays with his lighter. Suddenly, he stares at the little flame and says to the Ghost Slayer, "Now I remember, on our way up the mountain, we met an Underworld guard with a lantern, on the road right outside Clearstream Village. How could he not know what happened here, and just pass by the Awl of Mountains and Rivers like nothing?"

The Ghost Slayer says, "He was leading hundreds to the afterlife; he will have had other things on his mind."

Zhao Yunlan looks at him suspiciously, but he hides his doubts and continues, "The Four Mystical Artefacts have been missing for a very long time, scattered on Earth. Your Honour, why are you collecting them only now? Last time, we came across the Sundial by chance, but this time, you probably came for the Awl on purpose, didn't you?"

The Ghost Slayer instantly realises his carelessness, and remains silent. This man is too smart. No matter how foolish and unreliable he seems on the outside, he's merely hiding his overly sharp mind. Whatever happens, it seems he can always find a hole in a story.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't let him get out of this easily. Looking at his wide sleeves, he points out, "Your sleeves still have blood stains, Your Honour. I'd never heard of demon beasts before, and now they appeared together with the Sundial. The Underworld wouldn't say anything about them; what are they really? They couldn't have appeared out of thin air, so where did they come from? And the Mystical Artefacts, people have fought for them to the death, haven't they? Why would you let the Artefacts stay on Earth for so long?"

The Ghost Slayer has always been the interrogator, never the interrogated. He stays silent for a long time, struggling to find a suitable explanation. Finally, he says very politely, "Forgive me for being unable to tell you."

Lying to someone like Zhao Yunlan is basically making a fool of oneself. It's better just to frankly say, 'I know why, but I just don't

want to tell you.' than to go to the trouble of making up some nonsense.

Zhao Yunlan lights another cigarette, and inhales deeply. Nobody knows what he's thinking. After a while, he really stops asking questions. Instead, he stands up and takes out his empty cigarette box. He takes out the layer of mud with the octagon on it, and asks Wang Zheng, "What does this mean? Does it mean the Awl of Mountains and Rivers in Hanga symbols?"

Wang Zheng ponders. "When I was little, my father taught me that this means mountain, and a circle around it means water."

"Your dad didn't lie to you, did he?" Zhao Yunlan asks. "Didn't your illiterate tribe have another symbol for mountain?"

Luckily Wang Zheng is well-tempered, she remains calm and doesn't want to punch the Chief at all. She explains, "The octagon represents the sacred mountain specifically, which is where the Awl of Mountains and Rivers is located. This place used to be a forbidden site, and only the tribe leader could enter."

Zhao Yunlan frowns. "But there's no water around this mountain."

Wang Zheng hesitates. "It's been so many years, perhaps the terrain has changed."

Zhao Yunlan disagrees. "That's impossible; if a circle around the octagon represents water around a mountain, that's understandable. But it can't just mean water; Hanga script isn't usually this ambiguous."

Wang Zheng stares at Zhao Yunlan dumbly: she's always thought that although the Chief is a nice guy, he's probably not the hardworking type. But in only a few days, he's already come to know the Hanga tribe so well.



Zhao Yunlan raises his head, and looks towards the Awl. "The souls and spirits of the mountains and rivers... the Hanga used the Awl of Mountains and Rivers to perform Luobula restriction magic for god knows how many generations. They must have known something deeper. If water burial can prevent a soul from being trapped by the Awl, then it's very peculiar that the circle around the octagon represents water."

The Ghost Slayer follows his train of thought. "The mountain does not move; flowing water does not decay. The Guardian is suggesting that water might be the Awl's weakness?"

Zhao Yunlan laughs. "Why not give it a try?"

The Ghost Slayer stands up, and Zhao Yunlan motions at Wang Zheng as if calling a dog. He knocks on his watch impatiently.

Wang Zheng's silhouette flashes towards it and vanishes.

The Ghost Slayer retracts the smokescreen and points at the snow. The layer of snow around the Awl of Mountains and Rivers rapidly starts melting, and a stream of water soon surrounds the Awl.

And indeed, the trembling Awl miraculously calms down, menacingly silent like a temporarily appeased madman.

This time, the Ghost Slayer doesn't dare rush ahead. He stands outside the stream's perimeter, watching the Awl's reaction.

As he keeps gesturing, more and more snow begins to melt; streams grow among the freezing mountains, flowing faster, emerging from the thick layer of snow and swivelling towards the Awl of Mountains and Rivers like snakes.

Zhao Yunlan hears a hum. He heard it as soon as the smokescreen was lifted, but at first he thought the Awl was still having an effect on

him. Now, though, he seems to hear a stuttering voice amidst the hum.

"Not yet old... not yet old but ravaged..."

He has a familiar feeling, like the sudden rush he felt after the earthquake the other day.

Zhao Yunlan listens to the voice closely, and shortly he becomes mesmerised; he inadvertently repeats what he hears, murmuring, "Rock, not yet old but ravaged; water, not yet cold but frozen; body, not yet lived but dead; soul, not yet burnt but dispersed..."

The Ghost Slayer abruptly turns his head towards Zhao Yunlan. His face is hidden, but his gaze seems to stab right through him.

Zhao Yunlan quickly regains consciousness, and rubs his forehead vigorously. He suspects that he must be over-sensitive and having illusions... he feels like the Awl of Mountains and Rivers is trying to connect with him and lure him in.

As he lowers his head, he sees a flash of white light reflecting off the snow, and a man emerges out of thin air behind the Ghost Slayer. A huge axe slams down towards the back of his head.

Since entering the valley, Zhao Yunlan has never let go of the gun in his pocket. At the speed of light, he pulls it out, claps his hand on the Ghost Slayer's shoulder, and pulls the trigger without blinking.

Through the silencer, the bullet hits the man right in the forehead. At the same time, the Ghost Slayer turns around in a pitch black cyclone, and his blade meets the giant axe with a screeching noise.

They both stumble backwards, and Zhao Yunlan sees that the person with the axe is wearing a pale ghost mask. A dark liquid oozes from the bullet hole in his forehead.

Zhao Yunlan looks at the Ghost Slayer, then back at the person. He's confused... he has never heard of anyone like that before.

The Ghost Face raises his hand and wipes the black blood off his forehead. The pale ghost mask turns towards Zhao Yunlan and the painted face slowly twists into an eerie smile.

"Lord Guardian," a muffled voice comes from beneath the mask. "It's been a thousand years, and you haven't changed a bit."

Zhao Yunlan is slightly uncomfortable with this way of meeting an old acquaintance.

The eyebrows on the mask droop down, the face now half smiling, half crying, and the Ghost Face continues, "The Guardian wasn't so merciless to me before. But it doesn't matter; no matter how you treat me, your kindness in sharing the fire... even a hundred deaths —"

The Ghost Slayer interrupts, his blade slashing down in a blinding arc, hacking the air with a screeching howl. Although Zhao Yunlan has no clue who's who here, he quickly dodges aside so that he doesn't become collateral damage of two gods duelling.

He has never seen the Ghost Slayer so furious.

Wang Zheng's voice comes from his wristwatch. "Chief Zhao, who's that?"

With a cigarette in his mouth and both his sleeves pulled over his hands, Zhao Yunlan crouches down, observing the wretched action, and says sullenly, "How would I know, it's not like I know everyone... Don't tell me I look like a guy who sleeps around."

If Wang Zheng were a little bolder, she would probably have replied, "Can you be any more shameless?" Unfortunately, she's naturally gentle and reserved, so she replies with silence.

Zhao Yunlan leisurely watches the battle for a while, feeling like he's watching an action film. He twists out his cigarette in the snow and breathes into his hands to warm them, rubbing his freezing palms together.

"Rock, not yet old but ravaged; water, not yet cold but frozen," he says, and knocks on the watch. "Don't say anything; I just thought of something to try."

Wang Zheng worries what kind of crazy idea he might have. "Chief Zhao, Chief Zhao!"

Zhao Yunlan ignores her, and takes out a bunch of keys with an old key fob in the shape of a book. It's covered with weathered patterns, and there's a cursive *G* for 'Guardian' engraved on its back. Inside, the book is hollow.

Holding the keys, he walks towards the Awl of Mountains and Rivers. Suddenly, a few demon beasts emerge from the ground and surround him menacingly. They don't attack, but merely block his way to the Awl.

Zhao Yunlan stretches lazily and drawls, "Oh, I get it. So he's the 'master'. You guys took the Sundial. But what do you want with the Four Artefacts?"

The demon beasts don't reply and move one step closer to scare him away.

Zhao Yunlan laughs coldly and takes out a cigarette. He opens the little book-shaped key fob. Inside isn't a family photo but a tiny ball of fire, like a miniature lighter. He uses it to light the cigarette in his hand.

Zhao Yunlan snaps the little book closed, but he doesn't start smoking. He holds the cigarette with two fingers, and sighs. "There

are two things I hate the most in my life: ugly goons and disobedient dogs. You guys are quite the full package, and you're really getting on my nerves..."

The cigarette in his hand flies out like a small firecracker, then bursts into a giant, long-tailed ball of flames, arcing towards the demon beasts like a raging meteor.

One of the beasts screams "Samadhi True Fire!" as they're sucked into the inferno. The fire of the Bifang bird is one-of-a-kind; it burns them into ashes in a matter of seconds.

Zhao Yunlan smiles in the light of the blaze. "What? True fire, fake fire, haven't you morons heard of the king of secret weapons, what we humans call 'skyrockets'?"

The skyrocket rushes towards the base of the Awl.



## Chapter 41

The Ghost Slayer hears the commotion behind him and twists his wrist, swinging his blade at the Ghost Face. As he turns, he's almost blinded by the giant fireball. For a moment, he can't see where Zhao Yunlan is, and in desperation he shouts, "Yunlan!"

He's distracted, but the Ghost Face doesn't use the opportunity to dodge. Instead he faces the Soul Slashing Blade. Strangely, the Ghost Slayer hesitates and pulls his swing, the blade glancing harmlessly off the mask. He seems to have misgivings, as if he doesn't dare break the mask, and he dodges instead.

The Ghost Face laughs and rushes towards Zhao Yunlan like a huge cloud of black mist. His long cape swirls and absorbs the Samadhi True Fire from Zhao Yunlan's cigarette. Then he stands with his back to the Awl, facing Zhao Yunlan, and the demon beasts hide behind him, surrounding the Awl.

Zhao Yunlan studies him with narrowed eyes and says calmly, "That Bifang chicken boasted that its fire can burn the Monkey King<sup>53</sup>, but it couldn't even burn your crappy cloak; you must be quite a bigwig."

The Ghost Face's mask stares at him, expressionless. "I don't want to hurt you, Lord Guardian; it's better for you not to interfere in this matter."

Zhao Yunlan has one hand in his pocket and stands in a slouched pose; even without street talk he already comes across very much like a veteran hoodlum. He snorts, his words dripping with sarcasm. "Wow, I'm scared to death."

The Ghost Slayer hurries forward and pulls Zhao Yunlan behind him, his Soul Slashing Blade blocking in front. The gesture is so openly

protective that Zhao Yunlan looks at him in confusion.

Ever since the bizarre Ghost Face appeared, the Ghost Slayer hasn't been acting normally.

But now isn't the time for that. Hidden behind the Ghost Slayer, Zhao Yunlan fumbles around in his pocket. "Fancy that, the legendary Awl of Mountains and Rivers is really afraid of fire," he says. "No wait, the Awl suppresses and imprisons all souls within it; I suspect it's afraid of anything that flows – water, fire, even wind. It's just that normal wind, water and fire are all too weak, perhaps?"

The Ghost Face, with his frighteningly big eyes, turns to stare at Zhao Yunlan. "My Lord, being too smart will get you in trouble. It's been so many years, and you still don't seem to have learned this lesson."

The Ghost Slayer says, in a terrifying voice, "If you dare touch one hair on his head, I will make you regret that you ever crawled out of 'that place'."

The Ghost Face cackles. "You?"

The Ghost Slayer waits for the laughter to end, and says evenly, "Try me."

The ghost mask distorts, and the Ghost Face surges up like a huge bat spreading its wings. Then he swoops down again towards the Ghost Slayer's menacing blade.

At the same time, Zhao Yunlan starts sprinting in the other direction. A group of demon beasts rises up from underground and he shoots them down one by one.

The Ghost Face's eyes flash, and he chases after Zhao Yunlan at all costs, uncaring that the Ghost Slayer slashes a foot-long, gaping wound into his back from which blood spurts in a high arc.



There are so many demon beasts now, the area resembles a train station waiting room at New Year. Zhao Yunlan kicks the face of a beast so hard he can't feel his leg anymore. The beast falls back, and Zhao Yunlan steps on its shoulder. The long whip suddenly materialises in his hand and swirls towards the Ghost Face's mask.

For some reason, the Ghost Slayer is afraid of the mask coming off. Surprised by Zhao Yunlan's attack, he almost uses his scabbard to block the whip.

Luckily sanity prevails, and he restrains himself.

Although the Ghost Face is immune to gunshot, he seems to fear the whip. He jumps back seven metres at once, out of its reach.

Zhao Yunlan smiles silently.

The Ghost Face senses something wrong with this expression, but it's too late. When he turns around, there's a boom, and streaks of lightning come crashing down from the Nine Heavens, hitting all the demon beasts surrounding the Awl. They're quickly roasted, and one by one they burst into flame.

The fire from the sky ignites the entire Awl of Mountains and Rivers. Nobody can stop it in time.

Zhao Yunlan opens his hand, and a Thunder God talisman falls to ashes.

The treacherous, evil, filthy, and criminal are all subject to thunder and lightning as punishment from the Heavens. The demon beasts are inherently filthy creatures, so summoning lightning here is easier than usual.

Zhao Yunlan thinks he hasn't been infuriating enough yet. Dusting off his hands, he says patronisingly, "This story teaches us not to be a

show-off, unless you enjoy death by lightning."

As he finishes, the Awl begins shrinking like a melting glacier. The fire around it explodes into a flaming column a hundred metres high, reaching up to the sky. Amidst the rumble of thunder, a blazing cyclone surrounds the base of the Awl.

Countless blurry faces flash by in the light of the fire and quickly disappear again. From the depths of the earth comes a vigorous quake like a heartbeat; it's like he really called out the souls and spirits of the mountains and rivers.

Suddenly, the Ghost Face leaps towards Zhao Yunlan, but luckily the Ghost Slayer isn't paying attention to the burning Artefact at all. His blade clangs heavily against the Ghost Face's axe.

Surprisingly, the Ghost Face isn't going for Zhao Yunlan; he turns back with a weird smile and says next to the Ghost Slayer's ear, "He ruined my plan, are you happy now? Let me tell you, he must know a lot more, he just hasn't told you."

The Ghost Slayer turns his wrist, the blade vibrates with the shock of impact, and the Ghost Face loses a hand. But he doesn't seem to care and rushes back a few dozen metres, faster than the eye can see. The surviving demon beasts scramble to catch up.

The blood-stained sleeve flickers in the wind, and the Ghost Face screeches one last phrase: "You better watch your back!"

The group vanishes into thin air.

Zhao Yunlan's face is lit up in the blazing heat, and as the Ghost Slayer looks at his profile, he feels a sudden burst of panic; what did the Ghost Face mean by 'he knows a lot more than he told you?'

What exactly does he know?

Zhao Yunlan turns around and says, "Your Honour, give me a hand with your light-dimming sleeves."

The familiar smokescreen rises up, and Zhao Yunlan releases Wang Zheng. He holds out a wrinkled paper talisman. "Call him; let's see if I can summon Sang Zan's soul."

Wang Zheng's eyes widen.

Zhao Yunlan urges, "Quick, do it before the fire burns out!"

Wang Zheng floats mid-air and shouts something towards the Awl that Zhao Yunlan doesn't understand. The talisman shatters and turns into a soft breeze, gently carrying Wang Zheng's words towards the blazing Awl. Wang Zheng cannot leave the smokescreen, but she stands as close to the edge as she can.

Her usually impassive expression has turned into one of hopeful anticipation.

The Awl of Mountains and Rivers continues to shrink, and the fire gradually dies down. The spark in Wang Zheng's eyes eventually fades, but as the flames are about to wink out, the shadow of a man becomes visible in the embers, looking at them from afar.

Wang Zheng's expression leaves no doubt who this man is.

Zhao Yunlan takes out a Guardian Order talisman and flicks it with his fingers. The talisman shoots up and floats mid-air, and he says to Wang Zheng, "Go talk to him. If he wants, he can join the Guardian Order."

It turns out to be unnecessary. When Sang Zan sees Wang Zheng he freezes immediately, and then he walks out of the flames and straight into the talisman. The two vanish, and the talisman flies into Zhao Yunlan's watch.

After a long time, the fire has burned out entirely, and only a battered altar remains; the Awl is nowhere to be seen.

Zhao Yunlan walks across slowly, kicking at the ashes on the ground. He finds a small octagonal stone, thicker at the top and narrower at the bottom, like a wedge. He picks it up and throws it to the Ghost Slayer. "Your mystical Artefact, catch."

The Ghost Slayer catches and examines the small, ordinary-looking rock. He holds it next to his ear and listens closely. Soft sobbing is heard from within, very faint and not at all violent. But the sound leaves a mark on the heart: a mark of despair.

Wang Zheng's hopeful voice comes from the watch. "They... they've been freed?"

"No," the Ghost Slayer replies, "they're still inside. The Lord Guardian said the Awl is afraid of anything that flows, but that only applies to the parts of the Awl that were fixed in the earth; and the spirits that were burnt away were also only those from the earth. This is the true form of the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, and it can't be burned."

Zhao Yunlan smirks. "Yeah, I was just bullshitting, who would've known that bastard was so easy to fool. I find that people who like to hide behind masks are usually not all that bright."

The Ghost Slayer says nothing to that comment.

"Oh," Zhao Yunlan goes on, adding fuel to the fire, "of course I wasn't referring to you, Your Honour."

The Ghost Slayer knows Zhao Yunlan is angry that he didn't answer his questions. This fearless jerk is deliberately teasing him. He's not sure whether to laugh or cry, but then he realises Zhao Yunlan must have heard what the Ghost Face said, and that's the reason for those remarks. On one hand, he wants to lighten the mood between

them, and on the other hand, he's implying that he won't be suspicious just because of what the Ghost Face said.

The Ghost Slayer's heart sinks. This man is the best of his kind. He likely won't be able to hide from him for much longer.

Wang Zheng says anxiously, "What can you do to release them? How can we let them rest in peace?"

Her voice from the watch finally draws their attention.

"His Honour is taking the Awl of Mountains and Rivers with him, so the restriction on the souls will be lifted naturally. When they want to, they can come out. If they don't, it's because they don't want to. Who can really trap them in there except themselves?" Zhao Yunlan pauses, and says meaningfully, "In the final analysis, weren't people acting unethically back then?"

Wang Zheng doesn't speak.

Zhao Yunlan takes out his phone and checks the time against his watch. "Aren't you the same, silly girl?"

"I... am guilty..."

Zhao Yunlan says bluntly, "Oh yes, I want a thirty-thousand-word self-criticism, and I'll cut your annual bonus in half. Think about what you've done, comrade Wang Zheng, and you can make up our quota for intensive ethical education at Party HQ this year. I will ask Zhu Hong to find a body for you to wear and go to the lessons."

She stays silent for a moment, and says softly, "From the beginning to the end, there was nothing I could've done, was there?"

Zhao Yunlan suddenly smiles. "You stupid girl, now you get it."



## Chapter 42

"There are always some things about which there's nothing you can do," Zhao Yunlan says while digging a small hole and burying the page about Luobula restriction magic. He claps the earth off his hands, stands up, and continues, "Either become strong enough to deal with anything, or let go and forget. Does you no good to remember all the useless things, it's just a waste of space."

This time, Wang Zheng remains silent for even longer.

The Ghost Slayer walks forward and extends his hand. "We should go, Lord Guardian; I will take you out of here back to the pass."

Zhao Yunlan is already exhausted; of course he doesn't want to walk if he can get a ride. He takes the Ghost Slayer's hand and is pulled into an embrace. Their surroundings darken. Zhao Yunlan is still off-balance when he opens his eyes again, and they're already moving.

A moment later, the Ghost Slayer's cloak opens up, and they're back at the mountain pass. The Ghost Slayer lets go, takes a step back, and gives an old-fashioned bow. He turns, and in the blink of an eye, vanishes into a giant black hole.

Zhao Yunlan looks on from behind, and rubs his chin in deep thought.

As he's pondering, Wang Zheng speaks from inside the watch. "By the way, Chief Zhao, didn't you say you left your wallet in the car? Then what was that you pulled out just now?"

Zhao Yunlan's profoundly mysterious expression shatters, and he theatrically clasps his hand over his heart. "What do you want? I'm short on cash lately, I can give my body but not my money! What

about your guy? Why isn't he looking after you, that you have to be concerned with someone else's wallet?"

"He doesn't understand." Wang Zheng's tone relaxes a bit. "I heard you're buying a lot of antique books lately, like you're planning to become an antique dealer. Apart from that, what would you spend your money on?"

"A man eventually has to buy a house and support a family." Zhao Yunlan hides his hands in his pockets and shuffles forward. "You don't get it, little girl."

Wang Zheng laughs lightly. "I died three hundred years ago; who's a little girl?"

Zhao Yunlan latches on to that. "You're an old tramp who died three hundred years ago, and you're asking me for red envelope money? How can you be so shameless?"

The two keep on squabbling back and forth in the white expanse. Eventually, Wang Zheng says softly, "I didn't say it earlier but, thank you..."

Zhao Yunlan smiles, and knocks on the watch. "Don't think a sweet tongue can replace your 10,000 word self-criticism! Email it to me next week. On New Year's Eve, reading out your self-criticism in front of everyone will be one of the activities; you won't get out of that."

When Zhao Yunlan's leisurely walk finally brings him to the hut at the mountaintop, it's already evening.

Zhu Hong's eyes signal a question, and Zhao Yunlan waves his watch at her. Zhu Hong understands and takes out a handmade woollen doll. She discreetly passes by Zhao Yunlan and presses the doll to his watch without anyone noticing. Two streaks of white



smoke swiftly enter the doll, which starts stirring in Zhu Hong's palm as if alive.

Zhao Yunlan gazes around the hut, and he finds that everyone is here. They all look well: Chu Shuzhi is immovable, guarding the door, with Da Qing lying flat by his feet; Guo Changcheng painstakingly tends to a cooking pot in which something is boiling, the students sit around the fake monk Lin Jing and listen to his ghost stories with amazement and fright, and Shen Wei... eh, where's Shen Wei?

Why did he think that everyone was here?

Zhao Yunlan's face darkens, and he asks Zhu Hong, "Where's Professor Shen?"

Zhu Hong is visibly dumbfounded, her expression bewildered. But right then, Shen Wei enters the hut, carrying a pile of firewood. He says calmly, "Looking for me?"

It seems Zhu Hong has just remembered, and smacks herself on the forehead. "Right, Professor Shen said the fuel might not last the night, so he went out for firewood."

Shen Wei puts the wood next to the fire to dry. "Just in case. Did you find Xiao Wang?"

Zhao Yunlan glances at him and replies casually, "Yeah, we did. We ran into the rescue team on the way; I had some errands for her to run, so I had the rescue team take her back."

"Oh." Shen Wei turns around, and smiles gently and sweetly. "I'm glad that it turned out well. You must be exhausted, running around all day. Here, drink some woad tea<sup>54</sup>, it'll stop you getting a cold."

Zhao Yunlan stares at him for a moment, then smiles as if nothing had happened. He takes the medicine and guzzles it down in one

gulp. He never mentions what happened the other night, nor the many doubts he has tangling in his mind.

Zhao Yunlan has had quite an inhumane few days. First he drank an entire night with his friend Mr Lang; then he drove in the snow all day and didn't sleep half the night; then Wang Zheng drugged him, the Awl of Mountains and Rivers almost killed him, he trod through the snowy mountains for ages, somehow ended up battling a horde of monsters... the consequences of such an intense lifestyle hit him the next morning.

He wakes up with a stiff neck.

But even so, the boss is the boss. As soon as he wakes up, he starts ordering people around, and the small mountain hut is in chaos early in the morning. He orders Lin Jing to give him a shoulder massage, and Lin Jing gives him the Shaolin Great Strength Vajra Finger, almost breaking his neck. Zhao Yunlan is almost in tears, and suspects that Lin Jing did it on purpose. The two forget about the important things and chase each other around the hut like adolescents. After twenty minutes, Zhu Hong can't stand it anymore, and growls, "Are we leaving or not?" That finally makes them stop.

Zhao Yunlan punches Lin Jing twice, but his neck miraculously moves again. And so, he ambles away, hands behind his back, and begins packing. He picks up Da Qing and wears him around his neck like a fur collar.

The class captain asks curiously, "When did this cat get here? Is it coming with us? I thought it was a wild cat."

Zhao Yunlan answers with a low blow, "Have you seen a wild cat this chubby before?"

In response, Da Qing boldly slaps him in the face with his paw, fulfilling his wish of beating up the boss.

The class captain comes over and strokes Da Qing's shiny fur sympathetically. "Poor thing, must've been uncomfortable being shipped all the way here by plane... Oh right, Mr Zhao, Professor Shen said he'll drive on the way back so you can have a good rest."

Zhao Yunlan covers the cat-pawed side of his face and hesitates before turning around to look at Shen Wei.

They lock eyes with each other. Shen Wei lowers his eyes with a gentle smile.

To Zhao Yunlan, his subtle words and expressions seem to hide thousands of messages. His heart misses a beat as he remembers the other night when he woke up and locked eyes with Shen Wei. He feels like someone has taken a hold of his heart; it's a soft and aching feeling.

Zhao Yunlan falls asleep in the passenger seat as the car makes its way down the mountain. When the ringing of his phone wakes him up, it's way past noon and the sun is standing in the West. They've left the snowy mountains, and there are a few houses along the road.

It's his friend Mr Lang calling, it seems that he really needs a favour from Zhao Yunlan. As soon as he hears they're on their way down the mountain, he enthusiastically arranges accommodation for them, and says that last time they didn't have enough fun: this time he definitely won't let them go home sober.

Zhao Yunlan hangs up, looking stressed... he's not an alcoholic, nor is he superhuman. What he really wants now is a bed he can sleep in for eternity, not being forced to drink and chitchat with an old fat guy.

The sudden grievous turn of events has him devastated, and he isn't even in the mood to flirt with Shen Wei anymore. He drops the

phone and closes his eyes: every second of sleep counts before tonight's hard battle.

Shen Wei waits for his breathing to even out, and then covers him with a blanket.

When Mr Lang meets them in the city centre, Zhao Yunlan comes back to life from his wilting state, acting like his usual energetic self once more.

The two make small talk until half a bottle of Baijiu<sup>55</sup> is gone. Mr Lang is a little drunk, but still very lively, and eagerly calls for more.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't bat an eyelid, and makes drinking spirits look like drinking water; but his face is getting paler.

Mr Lang roars in a thundering voice trained by mountain folk songs, "Fill it up! Fill it up!"

Zhao Yunlan is in no position to stop him, so he just gives the waiter a courteous nod; then he bows his head to hide the desperation in his smile.

Mr Lang stands up and gives a speech. "I'm not very cultured, and I don't speak well; I'm just a crude man. The luckiest thing in my life is to have brothers like you. Like the saying goes, 'friends visiting from far away, is that not...' Isn't that something? You know what I mean, cheers!"

Zhao Yunlan has to raise his glass to 'isn't that something', but suddenly, Shen Wei stays his hand.

Mr Lang and Zhao Yunlan are both shocked.

Shen Wei takes Zhao Yunlan's glass and stands up, nods towards Mr Lang, and says politely, "Chief Zhao got a bit of a cold in the windy mountains, so he's not feeling too well."

Zhao Yunlan instantly coughs a few times in co-operation.

Shen Wei smiles. "But we all owe Mr Lang for taking care of us on this trip. I only brought a group of poor students who spend their time in the ivory tower of University; there's no way we can pay you back, so let me propose a toast to you."

His glass clangs with that of Mr Lang's, and he finishes the drink.

Mr Lang is taken aback: he knows what kind of person he is; he can hang with punks like Zhao Yunlan, but not with an intellectual such as Shen Wei, who'd normally look down on him..

He never thought Shen Wei would join in; this is a completely new experience in his drinking career. He gulps down the drink, and dizzily starts firing his words at Shen Wei.

Zhao Yunlan looks around the table: the fake monk Lin Jing avoids drinking, using religion as an excuse, but he mumbles some mantra and keeps gnawing on meaty bones until his mouth is covered in grease. Zhu Hong has said pretentiously, "A lady only drinks red wine," and is happily indulging herself with food. Chu Shuzhi has drunk half a glass and is already playing dead, Guo Changcheng... well this poor and honest kid, he's actually out, not even faking it. In short, a whole table of people, and none of them will help their Chief out.

Zhao Yunlan grits his teeth and makes a mental note of his disloyal staff. He quickly heaps a lot of food into Shen Wei's bowl so that he doesn't get drunk too soon. They work together to get Mr Lang drunk as soon as possible, until they're finally free from this nightmare.

Shen Wei is clearly not used to this kind of gathering. His cheeks are crimson, and his gaze vacant and disoriented. He struggles to stand up, stumbles, and drops back down. Zhao Yunlan swiftly catches

him, and asks quietly against his ear, "Damn, can you walk? Are you okay?"

Shen Wei doesn't reply and just sways dazedly. When Zhao Yunlan grabs him, he wraps his arm around Zhao Yunlan's waist, rather tightly and assertively.

This looks like... he's obviously not quite okay.

## Chapter 43

Zhao Yunlan has no choice but to put his arm under Shen Wei's to hold him up, tangled together in an almost-embrace. Fortunately, a drunk Shen Wei is silent and goes where he's told; he doesn't talk gibberish or act like a lunatic.

Zhao Yunlan shakes himself awake, hastily settles the others, and drags Shen Wei off. Swiping Shen Wei's key card, he opens the door to the room next to his. He hesitates, but in a rare moment of moral integrity, he manages to hold back and not take advantage of Shen Wei's compromised state.

He lets go of Shen Wei next to the bed and makes him sit down. Looking at Shen Wei's vacant and bland expression, he can't help but ruffle his hair. "You can't hold your drink, but drank for me anyway. Where do I find someone else as silly as you?"

Shen Wei looks up and stares at him with wide, unblinking eyes.

"Wait, I'll fetch you a towel to wipe your face." Zhao Yunlan walks into the bathroom and takes two towels. He soaks one in cold water and the other one in hot water. About to take the towels to the drunk kitten, he turns around and is startled: Shen Wei is leaning in the doorway. He has no idea how long he's been standing there already, in complete silence, watching him with a look so intense, it almost takes Zhao Yunlan's breath away.

The weight of Shen Wei's gaze pins him in place.

He lifts a towel towards Shen Wei. "Here."

Shen Wei's reaction is sluggish, he only raises his hand after a long time. But when he does, it slips past the towel, grabbing Zhao

Yunlan by his wrist. Aggressively, he pulls Zhao Yunlan towards himself.

Zhao Yunlan has long felt that something is off about Shen Wei tonight, but he's very pleased with this turn of events. He doesn't resist at all, and is easily pulled in.

With overwhelming strength, Shen Wei pushes him up against the wall, sealing their lips together, gnawing and tearing at them like a wild beast.

Zhao Yunlan almost instantly tastes blood, which turns him on. He wraps his arms around Shen Wei's back, deft fingers sneaking underneath Shen Wei's shirt and seductively caressing his back. The skin he touches is cooler than normal human temperature, like smooth and lush jade... except this precious gem is ruthlessly clawing and tearing at his clothes.

Zhao Yunlan bares his throat in encouragement, and lets him go on a rampage. His hand wanders downwards and suggestively reaches for Shen Wei's backside, sneaking into his trousers.

But before he can explore further, his entire body is abruptly lifted up. He's caught off guard, his feet dangling in mid-air, his body rapidly turning full-circle, before he falls backwards, landing on the bed. Shen Wei's weight pushes him down and holds him in place.

The bed rattles with the impact. Fortunately, the hotel has soft pillows and thick duvets, so the fall didn't hurt. Zhao Yunlan gives a pro-forma yelp and wipes blood off the corner of his lips. He chuckles, "Babe, you're too hot."

Shen Wei looks down at him from above, his dark eyes swirling with unspeakable, overwhelmingly intense affection.

A faint flush spreads across his face, and under the dim lighting, he looks more handsome than ever. Zhao Yunlan's heart beats higher.



He takes off Shen Wei's spectacles and sits up halfway only to pull Shen Wei in by his waist. He pulls down Shen Wei's shirt collar, letting his fingers trail along the edge of the fabric, lighting flames of passion as they slide down, slowly unbuttoning the shirt and revealing Shen Wei's pale, but not frail, body.

Zhao Yunlan's pupils are blown with pleasure as he leisurely kisses Shen Wei's chest. He says with a magnetic voice, "I was gonna let you off the hook tonight, but you started this yourself."

Suddenly, Shen Wei seizes his shoulders, pushes him down, and pounces forward, biting Zhao Yunlan's throat. He locks his wrists in place and holds him on to the bed tightly.

Zhao Yunlan feels that the man on top of him is panting more heavily by the minute; it's like he wants to swallow him whole. Zhao Yunlan is quite surprised by how passionate and aggressive he is. The biting is a bit painful, so he laughs and resists a little. "All right, baby, take it easy, you—"

Somehow, his small movements trigger a switch—if Shen Wei was a little rough before, now he goes utterly frantic. He shoves Zhao Yunlan's flailing arm up behind his back, flips him face-down, and clutches his nape as if trying to strangle him to death.

Zhao Yunlan is straining to look up, and he feels that his old bones are cracking.

Shen Wei weighs him down with his own body, and his icy fingers grasp Zhao Yunlan's chin. Predatory kisses are bombarding his face. The lights in the room go off on their own, and in the darkness, the only sounds are the man's impatient grunts and gasps, like those of a fierce beast that has been starving for years.

Zhao Yunlan's half-buttoned shirt is slashed open by force.

"Ah... that's enough, babe..... Shen Wei!"

Zhao Yunlan is aroused, but he doesn't want to go along with a Shen Wei too drunk to know what he's doing. With great agility, he leans back, pushing up his shoulder and freeing his arm.

Shen Wei howls, and then stops moving all of a sudden. Without a sound, he falls into Zhao Yunlan's arms. He isn't moving at all. The lights go back on as if a switch was flipped.

Zhao Yunlan blinks against the light, and stretches his hurting shoulder. Shen Wei is still in his arms. Zhao Yunlan is now definitely not in the mood anymore, and laughs bitterly. "Even when you're drunk, you're special..."

Zhao Yunlan's voice stops midway, and his eyes widen. His intoxication seems to evaporate: he's suddenly wide awake with terror.

In the silence, he can't hear Shen Wei breathing!

Zhao Yunlan presses his hand against Shen Wei's neck. Some ten seconds later, there's still no pulse.

Shen Wei's face is still a little red, but his body seems like that of a corpse.

"Shen Wei! Shen Wei!" Zhao Yunlan flips him over and slaps him in the face. There's no response. He starts performing CPR.

The man lying on the bed is like a mannequin. No matter how hard Zhao Yunlan tries, there's no change.

"Fuck!" Zhao Yunlan jumps off the bed and picks up his phone from the floor, stuffs the battery back in that had fallen out, and calls emergency. Following the doctor's suggestion, Zhao Yunlan looks through Shen Wei's luggage... if he has any long-term illnesses, there must be some medicine.

At this instant, Zhao Yunlan's eyes snag on his ripped shirt.

From the left shoulder to the lower-right abdomen, a long diagonal slit cuts the thick winter shirt in two. Zhao Yunlan examines the edge, and realises that it was cut by a sharp blade.

Shen Wei's hands are empty - there's nothing, not even a nail clipper. Where did he get a sharp object?

Zhao Yunlan is still half-drunk and has just had a huge shock, but now he finally comes back to his senses... a normal human wouldn't stop breathing and lose his heartbeat so instantly. Even a sudden heart attack has certain symptoms that come with it. But Shen Wei was like the lights in the room: switched off instantly.

Zhao Yunlan looks back at the man lying on the bed and frowns. He takes a black leather notebook from his laptop bag and slowly walks to the side of the bed. He pulls out a yellow paper talisman from the notebook and picks up a strand of Shen Wei's hair. He curls the talisman around the hair, burns it, and lets the ashes fall onto the notebook. Like salt sprinkled into water, they vanish without a trace.

Moments later, a line of writing emerges on a page in the notebook: Great Menace, a soulless person.

Zhao Yunlan's expression turns deadly serious. He presses one hand to the page and asks, "Where does this person come from?"

The writing on the page flickers and disappears. After a long wait, another line of words emerges.

"From beneath the depths of the Underworld, an unspeakable place."

Zhao Yunlan's frowns.

A few moments later, he quietly tidies up the room and fastens his ruined shirt together with a few small safety pins. He picks up his jacket that he'd thrown aside in drunken carelessness and puts it back on.

The ambulance arrives shortly afterwards. The others all rise in alarm, and amidst the chaos, Shen Wei is carried away.

The students are especially panicked, but Zhao Yunlan forces them to stay behind. He signals Lin Jing to take care of them, and follows Shen Wei to the hospital.

Shen Wei's heart is still not beating; the doctors are frantically trying to save him. Zhao Yunlan stands aside and waits in silence; he knows there's nothing wrong with this body. It's probably just that the person who possessed this body passed out drunk, and his temporary absence is now causing these frightening symptoms.

He hides his hand behind his back and takes out a summoning talisman. The paper ignites silently in his palm. Four burnt talismans later, Shen Wei is still unconscious.

Time passes, and the doctors begin to think he's dead.

Zhao Yunlan concentrates, and ignites the fifth one. He recites in his mind, "Lost soul, heed my call."

The third time he recites this, the talisman flashes, and Shen Wei's body shudders. Zhao Yunlan hears someone shout, "There's a heartbeat! There's a heartbeat!"

Only then does Zhao Yunlan sigh in relief. He surreptitiously hides the handful of ashes in his pocket.

Shen Wei seems to have no intention of waking up just yet.

The ambulance brought him to the hospital in the middle of the night, and the doctors are running various checks on him, unable to find anything. Zhao Yunlan has to stick around now, shivering in the winter night, just because he called the ambulance while he was still half-drunk.

Even his friend Mr Lang finally gets the news and rushes to the hospital. He never thought drinking could land you in there! Zhao Yunlan urges him to go back home; that poor fat guy, his face has turned green in terror like a cucumber—a shivering autumn cucumber.

~~~

When Shen Wei finally wakes up, he freezes for a moment. All sorts of tubes are connected to his body. He struggles to recall what happened, sits up, and begins pulling off the tubes.

"I'm afraid you'll have to stay here for a few more days," a voice says from the corner of the room. Shen Wei realises Zhao Yunlan is in the room, wearing a big overcoat and holding a steaming cup.

"Hospital?" Shen Wei is stunned; then his face changes, "I... did I drink too much?"

"Not just too much, your heart stopped beating."

"I..."

Shen Wei never realised he was such a lightweight. He casts around for an excuse, but Zhao Yunlan gently puts his cup down. "But this is my fault, too; I was dizzy and only half-conscious, and you scared me. I really shouldn't have called an ambulance. I'm sorry I have to trouble you to stay and play along for a few days..."

The more Shen Wei listens, the more something feels wrong here.

Zhao Yunlan pauses for a moment, and finishes his sentence:
"...Your Honour."

Chapter 44

For long minutes, Shen Wei doesn't say a word. Zhao Yunlan is in no hurry; he sits motionlessly in his corner. The hospital room is so quiet, you can hear the ticking of Zhao Yunlan's wristwatch.

Eventually, Shen Wei sighs and waves his hand. In the blink of an eye, the hospital gown is replaced with a huge black robe. His blade appears in his hand, and he simply lays the ancient weapon down across his lap... this time, he isn't hiding his face. "How did you find out?" he asks quietly.

Zhao Yunlan looks at him, and ponders. Finally, he says, "Actually I wasn't sure, I was just testing the waters."

The look on Shen Wei's face is difficult to describe.

Zhao Yunlan smiles. "Of course, I wouldn't have done that if I hadn't already picked up some clues. Like your small puppet messenger that arrived after I entered the Hanga cave. I mentioned the Underworld guard, but didn't say what he was doing, but you already knew he was leading a few hundred people to the afterlife. I couldn't help but recall the Underworld guard bowing twice towards the car. I asked Zhu Hong about you, and she only 'remembered' you when you arrived. You travel much faster than I, Your Honour, so you must've made a trip Downstairs. And also..."

And also when he had stared at him sleeping that night in the hut... this was when Zhao Yunlan had first become suspicious. But now it seems inappropriate to mention that to the Ghost Slayer. Zhao Yunlan pauses, and swallows down the rest of his sentence.

"Plus, your breathing and heartbeat stopped so suddenly that I got curious and asked the *Book of Life and Death*. It told me that 'Shen

Wei' is a soulless person from an unspeakable place." Zhao Yunlan taps his fingers on his knees. "Now that I think about it, there were quite a few tell-tale clues."

The Ghost Slayer is silent. He probably has no idea what to say.

Actually, Zhao Yunlan feels rather uncomfortable as well. He suddenly wishes he hadn't stated everything so bluntly. As soon as he remembers the things he got up to with 'Shen Wei' in the past, and his motives, he really just wants to keel over and claim amnesia. He massages his temples, feeling that his IQ must have plummeted rapidly tonight, given how many stupid decisions he made.

The two remain silent for a long time, until Zhao Yunlan finally decides to face his embarrassing actions, and coughs. "I didn't know before that Professor Shen was... uh, if I ever offended you, please forgive me, Your Honour."

Shen Wei just shakes his head.

Zhao Yunlan actually has more questions now, rather than fewer, but seeing the vacant and bewildered look on Shen Wei's face, he can't bring himself to ask any of them. He rinses his cup and goes to lie down, curling up uncomfortably in the tiny visitor bed.

Lying there a little cramped, he blurts without thinking, "It's late, let's get some rest. Call me if you need anything." As he finishes speaking, he remembers he's not talking to a real 'patient'. Somehow he keeps saying the wrong things today.

Zhao Yunlan has never been more deeply and soberly aware of the sad fact that he's a moron. He decides to shut up, lie on his side, close his eyes and pretend to sleep.

But neither of them can fall asleep that night.

~~~



The next few days, Zhu Hong is the first to notice that their Chief Zhao has 'changed his evil ways'. More specifically, he no longer goes drinking with his fat 'brother' Mr Lang, he no longer spouts bullshit all day long, and he no longer finds excuses to flirt idly with Professor Shen!

Even when they want to claim work expenses for shopping at the local night market, Chief Zhao approves it with a hand-wave; he doesn't scold anyone and doesn't seem to want to tag along either.

Shen Wei is still in the hospital for observation, and Zhao Yunlan comes with his laptop every day, nestling on the small visitor's bed, surfing the internet or looking up some peculiar information or other. The strangest thing, though, is that Zhu Hong hears Zhao Yunlan secretly ordering Guo Changcheng to bring him some clothes from his luggage at the hotel.

All this makes Zhu Hong stare at Zhao Yunlan in deep thought. She suspects that he got drunk and then somehow... did something to Shen Wei? Got so rough that Shen Wei had to be rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night?

But in that regard she's still puzzled. Zhao Yunlan doesn't get drunk easily, and that day only Shen Wei was actually drunk; Zhao Yunlan was definitely still conscious and rational. Besides, Zhao Yunlan's reputation as a lover isn't bad: those who've dated him all admit that he's willing to spend money, is loyal, and parted with them on good terms. Nobody ever spoke of any bad habits, let alone rape.

Or perhaps Professor Shen is just so charming that Chief Zhao lost his mind in desperation and did something indecent to him?

Zhu Hong ponders and ponders but still doesn't understand. She thinks bitterly, 'Is this Shen Wei guy really that good?'

~~~

That night, Zhao Yunlan asked Shen Wei to 'play along', and somehow he's done so; two days later, the diagnosis is that he went into cardiac arrest due to an allergy to alcohol.

As Mr Lang bids them farewell at the airport, he's deeply apologetic and tugs at Shen Wei's hands. "My brother, if I'd known you can't drink, I wouldn't have let you touch any alcohol at all!"

Zhao Yunlan thinks of who this fat guy is calling 'brother', and his eyelids twitch inadvertently.

Mr Lang glances towards Zhao Yunlan, and as he sees his expression, he lets go of Shen Wei at once. "Next time I'll make it up to you. You can drink tea, and I'll down two pints, how about that?"

Shen Wei doesn't understand why he thinks drinking two pints counts as making it up to him, but he nods politely.

Zhao Yunlan, who's carrying both their bags, reminds him, "It's time to go through security."

Shen Wei turns around quickly. "I can take that myself."

Zhao Yunlan dashes ahead, carrying his luggage for him without saying a word.

The SIU boys witness all of this, and led by Lin Jing, they cough suggestively. They don't understand their Chief's misery. Intending to cause further chaos, they make all sorts of faces and collectively tease Zhao Yunlan.

Lin Jing turns around with a look of deep affection and asks Chu Shuzhi, "Are you hungry?"

Chu Shuzhi covers half his face with the boarding pass, and feigns coyness. "Oh, I'm fine."

"Wait here, I'll get you something to eat."

Chu Shuzhi keeps covering his face as if his teeth are sore, and says in a flirtatious tone, "Oh, don't trouble yourself, there's stuff to eat on the plane."

Lin Jing imitates Zhao Yunlan's arrogance, and waves his hand. "Is that even food for humans? Even if it were, would I let you eat something like that?"

And that time at Dragon City airport, Zhao Yunlan bought Shen Wei some junk food 'for humans'.

Recalling how silly the Chief was, the guys shoot each other dirty looks and flash dirty smiles.

Zhu Hong elbows Guo Changcheng. "Xiao Guo, do you have anyone you like?"

Guo Changcheng blushes and shakes his head.

Zhu Hong says meaningfully to Zhao Yunlan's back, "If you do in the future, learn from your Chief, you will become the heartbreaker of this new generation... but of course, if you want to stay in a relationship for good, be selective in what you learn; that dude usually messes things up in the end."

Guo Changcheng's face and ears redden; he's getting the faint impression that Zhu Hong is cursing the Chief in broad daylight.

Zhao Yunlan turns around and glares at them. Lin Jing and Chu Shuzhi snigger like crazy.

The depressed Chief cannot put into words how embarrassed he is at this bunch of assholes following him around, mocking him the whole time. He usually has thick skin, so thick that not even the Awl

of Mountains and Rivers could get through, but now his face heats up a little.

On their trip here, Zhao Yunlan asked the air hostess to change his seat, following behind Shen Wei like a housefly tailing a farting butt, not giving a damn about the kind of exhibition he made of himself.

Now, Zhao Yunlan really isn't in the mood. But as he checks his boarding pass, he realises that Lin Jing switched their seats intentionally to two seats next to each other, away from the group.

As Lin Jing helps him with his luggage, he whispers in his ear, "You don't have to thank me, Chief."

Zhao Yunlan grits his teeth. "I thank all your ancestors for this."

But his lousy teammate will not let him switch back, so he suffers through the three-hour flight until they finally land. Then, Lin Jing realises that Shen Wei didn't bring his car, since he brought his students along. So the fake monk diligently sends the students home by taxi, and finally turns towards Shen Wei like a matchmaker, all smiles. "Doesn't Professor Shen live quite close to Chief Zhao? He can drive you back then."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't say a word, but in his mind, he sticks needle after needle into this bastard Lin Jing, until he looks like a hedgehog.

Lin Jing feels the resentment; he turns around and lets out an explosive sneeze.

Shen Wei smiles, "No need, I will call a taxi..."

Zhao Yunlan squeezes out a smile, and takes his luggage. "Let me drive you, it's late, if I drive you it's..."

He wants to say 'safer'. But before he can, he unfortunately recalls that night when he helped Shen Wei with the gangsters. Not only did

he beat them up, he intentionally put on a cool and badass pretence, like a stupid and conceited peacock fanning its tail when everyone can see its dirty ass.

The smile on Zhao Yunlan's face falters.

The novel's title is right after all: *Moonlight Reminiscence is Unbearable*⁵⁶.

He turns around and walks towards the car park determinedly, scolding himself in his mind, *Zhao Yunlan, just how much of an idiot are you!?*

Zhao Yunlan drives them to his apartment in complete silence, and stops directly in front of Shen Wei's place. "We've arrived."

Shen Wei looks up at the apartment building, but doesn't get out of his seat. He asks, "How did you know I live here?"

Zhao Yunlan has nothing to say, and only laughs softly.

Shen Wei looks at him, and suddenly says, "Guardian, you must have a lot of things to ask me, don't you?"

Zhao Yunlan doesn't speak. The two lock eyes in the rear-view mirror.

After a while, Shen Wei lowers his eyes. "Then why don't you just ask?"

Zhao Yunlan stays silent for a while before he says, "If you assumed this human form to stay here, it's probably not for a usual errand. Is it for something very important, Your Honour?"

"No," Shen Wei says, "it's just for personal reasons. It's just... because of someone."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't have to ask who that someone is at this point.

Chapter 45

As soon as he's finished speaking, Shen Wei regrets his words. He doesn't know what he was trying to convey by saying that to Zhao Yunlan, and neither does he know what he was hoping for. In this moment, he feels utterly contemptible and ridiculous.

Shen Wei is used to subtlety. Those few words had him slashing his chest open and pulling his heart out for the other to see. But he doesn't want to hear Zhao Yunlan's reply. He feels hesitant, like he doesn't have the right to say anything at all.

He has been decisive all his life; he's never felt like this before. Perhaps... it's just because he never got close to that special person who pulls his heart strings in both joy and anger.

After a moment of silence, Shen Wei lowers his head and opens the car door. "Thank you, I'm going up then."

Zhao Yunlan feels like he's about to split apart. He's been chasing after Shen Wei with all the tricks up his sleeve for half a year, and got so incredibly close to having him. If he were to describe the process, he'd call it 'giving him the stars in the sky, no holds barred.' He feels like even a straight guy would've turned gay for him... but he dares not treat the Ghost Slayer that way.

They've known each other for many years; they may not have been close, but have always been on good terms. Yet there's never been a way to get closer. Any sane person would treat a formidable figure like the Ghost Slayer with due respect.

His supremacy doesn't come from pure power—even though of course the Ghost Slayer was born with godly powers—but from the man himself.

Usually the darkest places give birth to the darkest evil, and there's logic behind that. When there's no hope to hang on to, one falls into darkness easily, not to mention that creatures born in the shadows are mostly born vicious and deadly.

Since the dawn of time, the Ghost Slayer has been the only exception: born in filth but rising up as a god. And it wouldn't have been possible without an unfaltering heart of steel. Zhao Yunlan doesn't doubt it for one moment: someone like the Ghost Slayer... like Shen Wei, even if one day he were to fall and perish, it would be immensely noble and irreproachable.

As Shen Wei opens the door, his usually attractive profile looks incredibly bleak. Zhao Yunlan doesn't know what he's thinking anymore, and on impulse holds the door in place. "I've never been in the Ghost Slayer's domain; why don't you invite me up?"

Shen Wei's eyes seem to light up in an instant; but he only nods politely towards Zhao Yunlan. "Please."

Zhao Yunlan locks the car and follows Shen Wei to his flat with conflicting feelings. Shen Wei's home is impeccable, especially when compared to Zhao Yunlan's miserable pigsty... phone and TV are under dust covers, the bin is sparkling, and dozens of documents are neatly piled up on the desk. The door to the bedroom is locked; not an inkling of what's inside.

Somehow it just lacks a bit of personality.

"Sit," Shen Wei says.

Looking at the sofa without a single crease, Zhao Yunlan doesn't feel comfortable placing his butt on it, so his posture looks particularly stilted.

Shen Wei fills a kettle with cold water, but doesn't set it on a stove. He holds the kettle in his hands, and shortly, the water starts boiling. He quietly takes out tea cups and a can of tea leaves, makes some tea and puts it in front of Zhao Yunlan. "I usually just stay here for a short time, so I haven't got any new tea, I hope you don't mind."

Of course Zhao Yunlan wouldn't mind... it's not like he can tell the difference between new tea and old tea. He picks up the cup, and his fingers feel the scorching heat. He suddenly asks, "Why did you keep me in the dark, Your Honour?"

Shen Wei hesitates. "It's embarrassing to talk about."

It's as amusing as it is infuriating. Exasperated, Zhao Yunlan says, "Right, you saved yourself the embarrassment, and just watched how I embarrassed myself? Did it entertain you to see me do all that silly stuff? I'm an idiot, there's nothing I can say about that, I admit it, but Your Honour, you were quite cruel to me."

Shen Wei doesn't disagree, only smiles good-naturedly, and changes the subject. "The Ghost Face we met that day— if you see him again, be very careful."

Zhao Yunlan blows at the floating tea leaves. "He's coming for the Four Mystical Artefacts?"

"Yes."

"What happens when all four are gathered together?"

Shen Wei explains, "The Artefacts were produced under Pangu the Creator, before the order of Yin and Yang was established. At the beginning of time, there were souls but no spirits, life but no death; men were deities and deities were like ants. The Artefacts contain power from a primordial time of chaos. If manipulated with purpose, they can disrupt the order of everything. It's my responsibility to keep them away from the wrong hands."

To this point, Zhao Yunlan has been listening in silence, which makes Shen Wei rather uncomfortable... he isn't afraid of Zhao Yunlan's questioning, he's afraid of him not asking. This man knows his boundaries, he never says what he's not supposed to, and he never asks what he's not supposed to. And yet he has a lot of speculations in his mind. What Shen Wei is most afraid of is not knowing what he has figured out in that brain of his.

After a long while, Zhao Yunlan slowly asks, "The Ghost Face wore a mask, and that day you didn't seem to want it to come off; is it because I would recognise his face?"

He noticed right then and there, and the whiplash towards the mask was intentional too! Shen Wei's face turns pale.

What the Ghost Face looks like doesn't actually matter, they both travel between the realms of Yin and Yang, so they both understand that a body is just a vessel. And yet, Shen Wei doesn't want Zhao Yunlan to know all the convoluted intricacies behind this. But he's too used to being a gentleman; he doesn't know how to lie, and so he freezes and doesn't know how to respond.

Zhao Yunlan instantly says, "All right, you don't have to say anything, I know who it is, and I won't ask. You... you don't have to frown."

His voice softens on the last few words, showing a hint of his usual subtle thoughtfulness. It touches Shen Wei's heart like a caress; his throat dries up and he can't utter a single word.

Zhao Yunlan tosses back the whole cup of tea in one gulp, feeling like he might have crossed a line. He's rather uneasy about this, and stands up. "We've been out for so long, and many things have happened; get some rest, I won't bother you."

He turns around and leaves. When he's already outside the door, Shen Wei suddenly says, "That day when I was drunk, besides

leaving this body, did I do anything inappropriate?"

Zhao Yunlan freezes.

Shen Wei looks anxious.

Zhao Yunlan turns around and smiles; his smiles are usually either cold or indecent, rarely like this, full of gentle reassurance. He points to himself and says half-jokingly, "Sure you did, Your Honour, you threw yourself at me; I'm still flattered and in shock."

Shen Wei can't tell if he's telling the truth, but his tone does sound flirtatious and teasing. Shen Wei looks at him helplessly. "Everyone else is frightened of me, how dare you."

Zhao Yunlan is all smiles, but his heart sinks.

He bids Shen Wei farewell and leaves the building. Before he gets in the car, he can't help but turn around and look up: the lights are still on in Shen Wei's flat, which isn't many floors up; Zhao Yunlan's keen eyes can clearly see a shadow by the window, quietly watching him leave.

It's like he has been silently watching his back forever.

Legend says he was born from the depths of evil, vicious and soulless; from the periphery of the Underworld, his blade cold as snow... but every time Zhao Yunlan thinks of him coming from and into darkness, always in solitude, wandering along the freezing road to the Underworld with countless souls, he can't help feeling sorry for this lonesome man.

He doesn't know what happened between him and the Ghost Slayer in all his past lives, and the other man clearly doesn't want him to know.

Zhao Yunlan didn't want to keep on asking. On one hand, the suppressed emotions he saw in Shen Wei's eyes at the hotel have him in fear and awe, and he almost doesn't dare go near him. On the other hand... he really doesn't want to hurt his feelings, or damage his pride. He may not be sure whether his impulse to spoil Shen Wei and take care of him is true love or lust or just a crush, but he can't bring himself to be so heartless.

He leans against his car and smokes a whole cigarette. After throwing the butt into a bin, he slowly drives away.

When Zhao Yunlan arrives at his place, Da Qing has been sitting beside the refrigerator for a long time. He interrogates Zhao Yunlan furiously. "Where's my cat food? For just a short time you haven't been blessed with my presence, and already you've thrown out my cat food! Treason! Treason!!!"

Zhao Yunlan ignores him, silently puts on slippers, pours a plate of milk, cuts up some sausages, and heats them up in the microwave for Da Qing... his refrigerator is still full thanks to Shen Wei.

Da Qing is shocked, and circles his leg. Sniffing his scent, he asks, "What's up with you? Why do you look like you ate rat poison?"

Zhao Yunlan stretches out his legs and leans back on the sofa. He picks the black cat up and puts him in his lap, stares into his eyes and asks, "When I was ten, you found me and gave me the Guardian Order Token."

The black cat nods, somewhat puzzled; he has no idea why Zhao Yunlan is feeling nostalgic all of a sudden.

"At that time, I was a happy-go-lucky naive child. I thought I was some male version of Sailor Moon." Zhao Yunlan laughs bitterly, and pats the fat cat on the head, "Da Qing, tell me the truth: who am I?"

Da Qing is stunned.

"You said you're a servant cat shifter of the Guardian Order, and that you would seek out every generation of Guardians. I always thought that the Order was like an ancient spiritual sword, that anyone worthy of it could wield it, but... actually, the Guardian has always been just one person, right?"

Da Qing's round eyes stare at him; sometimes his pretence isn't good enough and his gaze doesn't look like that of a cat.

"Where's the soul fire on my left shoulder? And what crime did I commit for it to be taken?"

These questions have Da Qing's hair bristling. "How did you find out?"

"I was guessing, I tricked you, stupid cat. You're just as easy to fool as he is..." Zhao Yunlan takes out a cigarette and leans against the sofa wearily. "But paper cannot wrap fire, the truth will eventually come out, so what're you upset about?"

Da Qing meows and hesitantly moves closer. Like a real cat, he curls up into a ball of fur, and his head nudges Zhao Yunlan's stomach softly.

The fat fuck is rarely so well behaved, so Zhao Yunlan takes him into his arms and softly caresses his back.

"I don't know," Da Qing says quietly. "I was only a kitten that hadn't yet finished cultivation; I spent my days fooling around, and you... you were about the same as you are now, a complete jerk, fearless and unruly. But one day, you suddenly left, for... a few dozen years. Nobody knew where you went, and when you came back, the fire on your left shoulder was gone. You held me and patiently grilled me a fish, which you would rarely do. You took out your whip and turned it into three paper talismans, and then gave them to me."

Da Qing closes his emerald eyes in Zhao Yunlan's warm embrace.

"What did I say?" Zhao Yunlan asks gently.

"You said you'd got into huge trouble, and... that you'd never return. I kept the Guardian Order talismans and continued my cultivation, and I searched everywhere for you for centuries."

Da Qing sounds as if he's about to cry. Zhao Yunlan can't help but sigh, but before he can say anything, Da Qing wriggles out of his arms, shakes his shiny black fur, and stands on top of his thighs, demanding arrogantly, "So you need to treat me better! The microwave has pinged several times already, go fetch my milk and sausage!"

Zhao Yunlan has nothing to say.

And so he flips the fat fuck off his lap.

Ink Brush of Virtue

Chapter 46

In the evening, Guo Changcheng leaves the care centre for children with autism. It's already dark, and the streets are clogged with freshly fallen snow. He has to drive at a snails' pace, and pray that he'll get there before the post office closes.

His battered little car is stuffed with all kinds of books: some are textbooks or exercise books, some are children's books; every single one is wrapped in multiple layers of craft paper and plastic wrapping. They're arranged in neat piles; at a glance, they look very much like a delivery from an online book store.

Guo Changcheng plans on giving them to a primary school he's sponsoring as a New Year's gift.

His driving skills are mediocre and he's not very brave. On the slippery road, his car crawls like a giant tortoise; and still, he almost bumps into someone.

A man in grey dashes out into the traffic and almost ends up under the wheels of Guo Changcheng's car. Several cars break sharply, but luckily everyone has been driving slowly, so there are no additional accidents.

A grumpy driver rolls down the window. He bellows, "Are you crazy!? Find somewhere quieter for your scams⁵⁷, will ya?"

But Guo Changcheng isn't so tough. He's shocked, and his palms are slick with sweat. He scrambles out of the car and asks tremulously, "You... are you okay? Sorry, I'm really sorry."

The fallen person is really skinny, so skinny as to appear deformed. His haggard face is half-hidden under the wide brim of a hat. At a

glance he seems shrouded in dark mist. His skin is waxy and pale, making him appear on the verge of death.

The angry driver is still yelling, "Come on man, leave him, will ya? That's a fucking psycho! Why didn't you just run him over?"

Guo Changcheng gives a feeble wave towards the angry driver, but as he looks at the person in front of him, he's even more terrified. He hesitantly extends his hands to help, "Can you stand up? How about... how about I take you to the hospital?"

But the person in the hat doesn't accept his help, quickly swatting his hands away and staring up at him. The eyes look dead, their gaze somehow petrifying. Guo Changcheng shivers.

Then, the person stands up and hurries off without looking at him again.

Guo Changcheng notices a black stain under one of the man's ears, like a fingerprint left by a finger covered in ash.

He stands there, helpless, and shouts after him, "Are you really okay? How about I give you my contact information? If you need anything, my name is..."

But the man has taken a turn into a narrow alley and is gone.

The angry driver leaves too, his last words to Guo Changcheng hanging in the freezing cold air: "Man, you stupid or what?"

Guo Changcheng sighs and turns to open his car door. Suddenly he sees a reflection in the window—it's the person in the hat.

He's on the sidewalk behind Guo Changcheng, stealthily hiding in a corner. When two women pass him by, he suddenly opens his mouth. His head morphs into a half-human form, and a tongue

several inches long slithers out. The creature makes a sucking motion at the two passers-by.

Guo Changcheng's eyes widen. One of the two women stumbles and almost faints as if from low blood sugar. Luckily, the other helps her stand. Guo Changcheng cannot make out what they're saying. He only sees a faint cloud floating from the body of the woman right into the gaping jaw of the hat-wearer.

Stunned, Guo Changcheng turns his head, but behind him he sees nothing except a snow-laden street and normal pedestrians.

He scrambles into his car, heart thundering, and quickly pulls out the stun baton Chief Zhao gave him. He stuffs it in the inner chest pocket of his jacket and pats it hard. It's as if it's grounding him; he slowly drives off.

That stun baton really is the best thing he got from the SIU, aside from his salary.

When he arrives at work the next day, Zhu Hong immediately waves her cafeteria pass in front of his face. "Xiao Guo, I want a beef cake today! One of the crispy fried ones, and get me a yoghurt, too!"

Guo Changcheng puts down his bag and without saying anything other than a simple "Yes", he rushes to the cafeteria. Right outside the office door, he runs into Chu Shuzhi, who's munching on half a deep-fried pancake. Guo Changcheng stands upright and greets him, "Good morning, Chu-ge."

Chu Shuzhi gives him the cold shoulder, barely sparing him a grunt and a glance in return.

He has already passed him, but then Chu Shuzhi quickly turns and grabs Guo Changcheng by the collar, pulling him back. "Hold on, did you run into something dirty?"

Guo Changcheng just stares at him stupidly.

Chu Shuzhi's hands smell of deep-fried pancakes, and they're grabbing him by his shoulders, turning him around, patting him on the back and both sides of his waist. Then, Chu Shuzhi wipes his hands with a paper towel, and pushes Guo Changcheng away. "You were oozing bad luck. All right, now you're clean, you can go."

Guo Changcheng's face and ears redden. He runs off with tiny steps. Chu Shuzhi takes another crunching bite of pancake, oily crumbs dropping to the ground. "What kind of cultivation has this kid been doing, his virtue is so thick it's dripping off of him like grease..."

Hungry Zhu Hong's mouth is watering; it sounds like he's describing a tasty pig.

"Food! Food!!!" Zhao Yunlan comes crashing through the door, and without saying anything, searches Chu Shuzhi's body. He finds an egg in his coat and unceremoniously takes it for himself.

Chu Shuzhi is furious but dares not say anything.

Then, Zhao Yunlan takes a pack of milk out of the refrigerator, tears it open and drinks it.

Da Qing howls, "That's mine! Mine! You're stealing cat food, you shameless prick!"

Zhao Yunlan looks at him without a care. "Yeah, I did... what're you going to do about it, short fatty?"

Da Qing has nothing to say.

"Why don't you go to the cafeteria..." Zhu Hong says.

"I'm in a hurry," Zhao Yunlan snaps and runs straight for the wall, just as Guo Changcheng comes back with a beef cake. Before he has

time to be amazed, Chief Zhao has passed straight through the wall and disappeared.

"You can close your mouth." Zhu Hong takes her breakfast. "There's a door to the library there; you're not capable of understanding anything inside, so naturally you can't see the door either."

Chu Shuzhi finishes his pancake and still feels one egg away from full. He quickly snatches a small piece from Zhu Hong's beef cake. "Better than me, I can see it but can't get inside... the library isn't open to me."

Guo Changcheng asks, "Why not?"

Chu Shuzhi's grouchy face pulls a creepy smile. "Because I have a criminal record."

Guo Changcheng is left silenced.

He really is still frightened of his Chu-ge.

A while later, Zhao Yunlan hurries out of the "wall" with a tattered old book. He throws the egg shell and empty milk packet into Guo Changcheng's rubbish bin and snatches a paper towel from Zhu Hong's desk. Without a word, he rushes off.

And then he disappears for one whole day.

It has been half a month since their trip to the snowy mountain ranges. In the blink of an eye, the Lunar New Year has arrived. Winter storms freeze Dragon City, intent on blowing everybody into the new year.

Chief Zhao is so busy that he almost forgets his own name. He has to prepare gifts for all his important connections and receive all the gifts from fair-weather friends in all sorts of places. There is endless correspondence, endless social engagements, endless reports,

meetings and conferences. The phone in his office is ringing non-stop as if he were the railway ticketing hotline.

New calendars are set up on all the working desks in all the departments. On this day, dusk comes early, and Sang Zan floats to criminal investigations before the day-workers leave.

He has it tough. He was a ruthless conspirator when he was alive, and he entered the Awl of Mountains and Rivers upon death, being trapped in a lightless and timeless prison for centuries. Now he's transformed and ready to lead a new life... no, afterlife. But he finds he's been turned from a conspirator to a simpleton: he can't even understand human language anymore.

Wang Zheng is the only one left in the world who can communicate with him; and although Hanga language is Wang Zheng's mother tongue, she spoke it for less than twenty years. The next three centuries she has been speaking Mandarin. When Sang Zan realises that Wang Zheng is much more fluent than he when she talks to humans and other ghosts, he's determined to learn Mandarin.

There's no holding back when Sang Zan is dead-set on a goal: he even poisoned his own wife and child. Over the next few weeks, he spends almost every waking moment murmuring words into Wang Zheng's ears. It almost drives Wang Zheng insane, until he finally begins to grasp the basic rules of pronunciation. He's now capable of parroting, and even making some simple conversations on his own.

Sang Zan carefully articulates one Mandarin word after another, announcing, "Gelan says at the end of the year besides year... year-end 'bones', there will be extra 'bunny feet', so... everyone please send, send your wheat sheets."

He's clearly speaking without understanding what he's saying.

Lin Jing asks, "Amitabha. What wheat? What sheets? Are we making steamed buns for New Year's Eve?"

Sang Zan gesticulates and says, "Not bans, it's wheat sheets! Butter be trainspot..."

"Chief Zhao says besides our year-end bonus, we'll get an additional five thousand as extra benefits. Come get it from me by this weekend, and send me your receipts next week. Better be transport fees, but insurance fees are also okay." Wang Zheng floats downstairs hurriedly, and glares at Sang Zan: "You didn't memorise it correctly."

Sang Zan looks at her, and his grim expression softens. He starts smiling stupidly and carefully reaches for her hand.

"Don't distract me, I'm busy," Wang Zheng softly censures him. "Zhao Yunlan went to a gathering with one of those brother-in-laws of his, but I still have an urgent document for him to sign."

Sang Zan quickly says, "I... I give..."

Wang Zheng retracts her hand. "No you won't, you'll scare his brother-in-law to death."

Sang Zan doesn't argue and silently follows after her, watching her run back and forth in the dusky corridor, busy with her work.

Wang Zheng turns around and whispers something no-one else understands. Sang Zan starts to smile contentedly, a transcendent look that says everything is going to be fine.

"What I hate the most is PDA, especially in a foreign language. I'm going blind." Zhu Hong lowers her voice and mutters, "The Ghost Terror has only just stopped flirting, and now these two are starting!"

Lin Jing says, "Goodness, madam, please don't be burdened with envy and hatred."

Zhu Hong is about to hit him, but just at that moment, the phone on her desk rings. She picks it up. "Hi... oh, where?"

She gestures for everyone to stay, seeing as they're about to leave already. She takes out a stack of memo pad papers. "Uh, go on... Yellow Stone Road, Yellow Stone Temple Hospital. All right, I'll tell them... oh right, if you have time, come back to the office; Wang Zheng has things for you to sign."

Everyone can tell it was Chief Zhao who just called. After hanging up, Zhu Hong huffs angrily. "Come on, why is it always the same around here... no work during the day, but overtime at night. Five minutes after close of business, our shady Chief has work for us."

Hearing this, Lin Jing reacts as quick as lightning: he immediately pushes the door open and disappears from sight at the speed of light.

Zhu Hong writes the address on a memo and sticks it on the wall. She pulls her scarf up to her ears and complains: "It's winter, and I'm a girl, I can't stand the cold..."

Da Qing immediately follows up with, "This old cat hasn't got a down jacket."

Everyone's eyes fall on Chu Shuzhi, the last to react. He faces his bastardly colleagues, and a million words only turn into one: "Fuck."

Ten minutes later, Chu Shuzhi sits in Guo Changcheng's car, heading to Yellow Stone Temple Hospital.

Chapter 47

Chu Shuzhi doesn't talk to Guo Changcheng much, but in the few times they've come in contact, he always managed to show off his skill. He has left an indelible impression in Guo Changcheng's young heart.

Guo Changcheng finds the Chief remarkable, too, but he's usually friendlier, and his jokes and pranks give him a more down-to-earth vibe. He's at most like a father or big brother, no matter how powerful he may be. There's nothing mysterious about him.

Chu Shuzhi is different. Chu-ge is totally an 'otherworldly sage' to be admired from afar.

As taught in the online *Code of Conduct for the Newcomer at Work*, Guo Changcheng carries a small notebook with him. He follows Chu Shuzhi eagerly, not daring to say a word, just jotting down notes on everything he sees.

As the two enter the hospital, they see a young policeman waiting at a door. They show him their ID and they all walk into the ward together.

The one leading them inside is called Xiao Wang, and he tells them while they're walking, "Our Chief of Police is inside, too. He just talked to Chief Zhao on the phone. This incident is particularly severe. The victim's family called the police to report someone maliciously selling poisonous food. The victim is in there, but so far, the doctors haven't been able to figure out what kind of poison it is."

Chu Shuzhi asks, "Food poisoning? What kind of food?"

"Fruit," Xiao Wang says. "The victim got off work late last night and didn't have time for dinner. According to his family, he ate an orange he bought from a street vendor. After eating it, he passed out immediately, and they sent him to the hospital. I've heard of poisoned water or processed food with harmful additives, but never poisoned fruit."

As he speaks, he pushes open the door to the patient's room, and someone gives an earth-shattering scream. Guo Changcheng jumps in fear and, standing on tiptoe, peeks into the room from behind Chu Shuzhi.

A man in his late thirties is lying on the bed, struggling uncontrollably as doctors and nurses hold him in place. There's a crying woman in the room as well; probably a family member.

The man on the bed clutches a doctor's hand, almost tearing off his skin, howling and raving, "My legs, my legs are broken... My legs! Ah! Ah!!!"

He's wailing and screeching, the blue veins on his neck standing out.

"Help! Help me... my legs are broken... it's so painful, help... it hurts!!!"

"Legs?" Chu Shuzhi asks Xiao Wang. "Didn't you say it's food poisoning? What happened to his legs?"

"Nothing," Xiao Wang says, "not even a bruise. They scanned his legs and found nothing... that's why we're clueless."

Chu Shuzhi walks forward and pats a nurse on the shoulder, signalling her to move aside. He lifts up the man's eyelids and studies his irises. Then he examines the back of his ears, mutters something, and makes a snatching motion with his hand. At last, he makes a fist and thumps the man's solar plexus, hard.

The man suddenly stops struggling.

Chu Shuzhi asks, "Still painful now?"

The man catches his breath and looks at him gratefully, shaking his head.

The doctors and nurses around them all stare at him as if he were a member of some evil cult.

Chu Shuzhi heartlessly pulls back his fist, and without a care for the resumed screaming behind him, turns to Guo Changcheng. "We're done here; let's head back and write the report."

Guo Changcheng is speechless. *Their job is done just like that! That... What just happened?*

~~~

Shen Wei's elective course is in the evening. Watching the last batch of students leave, he packs his bag and goes back to his human-world apartment. On the way, he keeps checking his phone... as if he's really concerned about the time.

His phone has merely three functions: phone calls, messaging, and telling the time. He's never played the games that came with it.

Shen Wei doesn't like this gadget, he finds writing a letter more convenient. If it's urgent, you can write a quick note; if it's not, you can take your time and write a little longer, unlike phone calls, which are charged by the hour. Whenever he thinks of that, he feels like someone is watching him talk on the phone, and it makes him very uncomfortable.

And opening a letter is a process marked with joyful anticipation, especially when the sender is someone special. Their handwriting

alone can trigger the deepest longing, and their letters can be kept in a collection for a long time.

It's a pity that Zhao Yunlan never writes letters. Even when he's signing for a delivery package, he finds his name too long and just scribbles an illegible "Zhao". The Ghost Slayer gets verbal messages from the messenger puppet; Shen Wei is bombarded with instant messages.

The cold fonts of the messages look no different from those sent by the telecom company to notify him of his account balance. Though Shen Wei never deleted any of them, he has never quite gotten used to them... but now there's nothing for him to get used to anymore. Ever since they came back from the mountains, Zhao Yunlan hasn't disturbed him again.

*Perhaps this is for the best,* Shen Wei thinks.

A normal human lifespan is only a few dozen years. To him, that's like snapping his fingers. Men die like burnt-out candles, and afterwards, everything they did in their lives becomes meaningless. When that time comes, Zhao Yunlan will forget all about him once again.

Shen Wei enters his bedroom, pushing open the door that he always keeps locked. As it opens, the lights turn on automatically.

In the room, there's no bed, no table, and no chair; only a cluster of portraits on the wall. From the frames one can see that they're aged, and they're all images of one man: front, profile, back view; the pictures are arranged chronologically, as seen from his clothes, which change through dynasties and periods. And yet it's always the same person; even the most detailed expression in his eyebrows is portrayed scrupulously, and it never changes throughout the centuries.

After the ancient paintings come big and small photographs, some of his teenage years, others of his older years... smiling, frowning, chitchatting and fooling around; there's even one in which a cat pounces onto his head, and he's tilting his neck and yelling.

All are Zhao Yunlan. It's always been just him.

Shen Wei understands that there are some things only he has to know, only he has to remember. When the time is up, he'll also disappear, alone. Better if no-one notices... after all, his very existence is a mistake.

Until then, the only thing Shen Wei can indulge in is stealthily watching Zhao Yunlan without him noticing. He can sneak into his apartment late at night, but that man is very alert, so he can't stay for long. Luckily, Zhao Yunlan has been to a lot of dinner gatherings lately, and he usually arrives home half-drunk. Only then can Shen Wei walk just a little closer.

Coming without a sound. Leaving without a sound.

Shen Wei's look lingers fondly on the wall full of paintings and photographs; then he disappears in a cloud of black mist.

He speeds down the road to the Underworld. Beside the Bridge of Forgetfulness, the Judge is presiding over a crowd of Underworld retainers, including Black Ghost and White Ghost<sup>58</sup>, as well as Ox-Head and Horse-Face<sup>59</sup>, and they're all waiting for the Ghost Slayer.

The Judge is a pale-faced and plump middle-aged man; he wears a kind expression. As he sees Shen Wei, he's all smiles and excessive politeness. "Your Honour, the Ten Kings of the Underworld are expecting you."

In this desolate land full of wails, next to the Bridge of Forgetfulness, Shen Wei's delicate eyebrows appear a bit cold. He nods towards

the Underworld retainers, and without looking up, he says politely, "Thank you very much."

Watching his expression carefully, the Judge says, "Last time we sent the Guardian the *Book of Life and Death*; that was truly a mistake on our part. It almost revealed your identity, and we're incredibly sorry, Your Honour."

Shen Wei just looks at him, so utterly calm that the Judge is dripping cold sweat.

He starts grovelling at once. "But everything regarding Lord Kunlun has been wiped away, I can guarantee, nothing remains, not even the tiniest clue. The Guardian is now amongst the living, and as long as the Ghost Face doesn't tattle, he won't find out anything. Besides, the Guardian is so noble and benevolent, a filthy being like the Ghost Face wouldn't dare 'awaken' him."

Shen Wei laughs softly in unspoken derision, but he doesn't say anything... there's nothing good to be said.

The Judge barks a dry laugh and wipes his sweaty brow with his sleeve.

He too feels that blatantly sending Zhao Yunlan the *Book of Life and Death* was an idiotic move on the part of the Underworld, but what can he do about it? It's not like he calls the shots here.

There are ten big deities above him. The big guys even ordered him to secretly find out what the Ghost Slayer thinks, which side he's on, and if he can be swayed from his position. Although the Ghost Slayer rarely speaks, and his unfailingly polite manner makes him seem like a pushover, things are crystal clear in his mind.

Nobody is stupid here. The old Judge really doesn't want to find out how fast the Ghost Slayer's blade is.

Besides, if that big god were really awakened, would he then agree to be on their side? When he was banished all those years ago, wasn't it because he rebelled against the order of things?

## Chapter 48

"After we've investigated a case in the field, we need to write a report. I type slowly, you do it." Chu Shuzhi pours a cup of tea, and leisurely leans back in his chair. "Type what I say."

Guo Changcheng immediately sits upright in front of the computer, as if he has to take care of a huge task.

The 'people' of the SIU are all gone, the only ones left are floating ghosts. In the darkness, only one light shines in criminal investigations, like a lighthouse shining across the ocean at night.

The two haven't been sitting there long, when someone knocks on the door. Chu Shuzhi tells them to enter, and a big steaming tray comes flying in. Upon a closer look, the tray isn't flying on its own; it's carried by a headless person, hidden behind the big tray.

There are two sets of utensils on the tray, four dishes, a pot of soup and two bowls of rice. The headless ghost gently floats into the room and carefully places the food on the table. He takes out a bag of cat food out of nowhere and fills up Da Qing's cat bowl.

Da Qing sits with elegant composure and nods subtly. "Thank you... it would be splendid if you could offer your king some concentrated milk as well."

Some TV shows ought to include a warning: mentally challenged children and fat cats must be accompanied by an adult.

The headless ghost floats towards the fridge and takes out a bottle of milk, pouring a bowl for Da Qing the Great.

Guo Changcheng has gotten used to the environment in No. 4 Bright Avenue. He has come to think that humans and ghosts aren't that



different. Some ghosts are kind-hearted, like this headless fellow who brings people meals whenever they have to work overtime. When Guo Changcheng left the post office the day before, he had only a single banknote of twenty yuan left, so this helpful ghost really makes him feel the warmth of spring.

After their meal, Chu Shuzhi slowly sips his hot tea and tells Guo Changcheng, "Here's the gist of it. As for the format, find some old reports and adjust your own to fit. That guy wasn't poisoned, he was cursed by ghosts... uh, as in resentment. The victim suffered from pain in his lower limbs, so the ghost likely died of physical injury. The victim's forehead was darkened, eyes reddened, the Line of Karma beneath his eyelids wasn't deep, and the black Mark of Virtue behind his ear was very light. He's probably not directly related to the ghost who laid the curse on him, and didn't deserve it. On the face of it, that ghost is breaking laws..."

Guo Changcheng's eyes widen and he lets his hands flop down onto the keyboard. He can't keep up and doesn't understand what Chu Shuzhi is saying at all.

Chu Shuzhi sighs, stretching his legs. He turns around and asks the anxious dimwit, "Alright, what do you not understand?"

"What's the Line of Karma?"

Da Qing raises his head from the milk, showing the white moustache that has formed on his black fur. He ignores the stain and says furiously, "What's up with Zhao Yunlan? He spends his days indulging in lust and greed, does he ever have time for important business? Has there ever been a training session for the newcomer? Why does this kid not know dog crap?"

Chu Shuzhi can't let a cat badmouth the Chief, so he says, "Chief Zhao has been busy with the renovation lately. Once it's settled, we'll move to a private chateau with a huge garden, and you can have a big cat house up in a tree with a view of the bird nests."

The bossy cat pauses, and his anger subsides a little. After a while, for the sake of his big tree house with a bird-nest view, he twitches his whiskers and offhandedly explains to Guo Changcheng: "The Line of Karma is just that, it's karma, it's causality. Let's say a murderer comes in here and kills you for no reason, then there's no karma, and no Line of Karma. If a murderer comes in here, and you're blocking his way, and he stabs you to death, that barely counts as karma, since you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that's just fate. The resulting Line would be very light and could be wiped off easily. If a murderer comes in here because he found out that you were sleeping with his wife and kills you out of wrath, the Line of Karma on you still wouldn't be very deep, but it also could not be wiped off. You weren't innocent, but didn't deserve to be killed for your offence either. His actions were disproportionate to the cause. If a murderer comes in..."

Having been murdered several times already, Guo Changcheng can't help but continue, "...and he realises I'm his enemy, the one he wants revenge on, and he stabs me to death, then the Line of Karma would be deeper?"

Da Qing cocks his head. "There's hope for the kid yet."

Guo Changcheng then asks, "Then... then what's the Mark of Virtue?"

Chu Shuzhi takes over again: "Whether a person has done good or bad deeds, there will be a mark behind their ears. For example, if a person kills someone, even if the police don't catch him and nobody ever finds out, the crime itself will leave a black mark behind his ear, that's the Mark of Virtue. In the old days, people called this 'damaging the Yin'."

As for those with good virtue... Chu Shuzhi looks at Guo Changcheng, and he can see a white mark behind Guo Changcheng's ear, like a ray of light shining gently. However, the

glow isn't visible to everyone. Even those with the third eye must concentrate hard to see it.

Guo Changcheng seems to be in deep thought. "Does the black mark look like a dirty fingerprint?"

Chu Shuzhi is startled. "You've seen one?"

Guo Changcheng nods and tells them about how he almost ran someone over with his car the night before.

Da Qing giggles, "A black mark so big that even a normal human can see it! That jerk will probably be electrocuted by the Heavens very soon."

Chu Shuzhi explains as he sees Guo Changcheng's puzzled expression. "A human's Mark of Virtue isn't visible to the naked eye, so the thing you met can't have been human. The reason why most cultivated shifters dare not harm humans is because of the Mark of Virtue. If the black mark gets too deep, they'll be punished by thunder and lightning, and that's no fun at all. Not only the punished shifter will be electrified, but nearby ones as well. And so every year when the shifters gather at their Tribes Market before the New Year, they monitor everybody's virtue to make sure none are crossing the line. They'd rather take care of the evildoers themselves before news of their crimes reaches the Heavens."

Guo Changcheng understands only partly. "Then if a human does bad deeds, will the Heavens also punish them by lightning strike?"

"No." Da Qing wiggles his tail and jumps to the floor. He arches his back and curls up into a ball of fur next to the heater. "Haven't you heard the saying 'He who mends bridges goes blind, he who kills people has plenty of children'? The human world has its own laws, and most people never get to reincarnate anyway. Life's so short, and men die like ants, long before karma can catch up to them, so accruing virtue really does a human no particular good... it might

make them luckier, but not always. Look at you, for example: you have great virtue, but you're still an unlucky little cabbage."

Guo Changcheng lost his parents, becoming an orphan when he was still young. On top of that, he was born untalented and timid. Though Zhao Yunlan jokingly said that bringing him along as a mascot would bring them luck, it doesn't change the fact that Guo Changcheng has had quite a difficult life.

"Really? I have good virtue?" Guo Changcheng is shocked to hear this. "I have an unlucky life? Not really, I think my life has been quite good, it's just that I'm not very capable."

He always feels that he's not very capable. Since he was little, all his relatives pitied him, and always gave him a lot. Now that he has grown up, he's still a useless piece of work, but his uncle arranged such a well-paid job for him, and his Chief and colleagues all take care of him well, even letting him stay when he adds no value to the team whatsoever... isn't he kind of lucky?

The black cat's drooping eyes open wide, and he looks at Guo Changcheng. His emerald eyes shine with a flash of golden light.

But before he can give a speech, Zhao Yunlan staggers in, bringing with him a gust of cold air and the stench of alcohol. He asks in a hoarse voice, "How's the report going?"

"Eh..." Guo Changcheng is about to say something, but before he can, Zhao Yunlan waves him off and staggers off into the bathroom, where he promptly vomits.

Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng hurriedly follow. Da Qing snorts, sluggishly unfolds his fat paws from underneath his body, and pads forward with a swaying gait. "Stupid human."

The stupid human presses a hand to his stomach and leans against the wall, his face pale.

Chu Shuzhi pats him on the shoulder. "How did you get so drunk..." Then he turns to Guo Changcheng. "Xiao Guo, get some warm water."

Once Zhao Yunlan is done vomiting, he washes his mouth and stands up on wobbly feet. He laughs bitterly. "Those bastards ganged up and forced me to drink, what could I have done?"

Chu Shuzhi replies, "That's bullshit, who can force you if you don't want to drink?"

Zhao Yunlan walks outside while holding on to the wall. "I'm broken-hearted, why can't I drown my sorrows in alcohol?"

"Ouch, Professor Shen still doesn't want you? Teachers really do have good taste, the people approve." Da Qing sidles up against his leg. "Hey, it's almost New Year, that's not a good time for drunk driving. You wouldn't be so stupid, would you? You can land in jail for half a year."

Zhao Yunlan succinctly and bitterly tells the fatty to fuck off.

He finds a chair and plops down. Sitting there, he looks as feeble as a dying dog. "Xiao Guo, go call Wang Zheng and let her bring the things for me to sign. Lao Chu, tell me what this case is about."

Chu Shuzhi briefly summarises the uncomplicated incident, and Zhao Yunlan thinks about it for a bit. "How about you finish up the report tonight? I'll wait, and when it's done I'll stamp it and fax it; hopefully we can get a reply by tomorrow."

Chu Shuzhi doesn't have a problem with that. After all, it's not like he's the one who just puked up his guts.

When Wang Zheng comes downstairs, she first pours him a cup of honey water. Zhao Yunlan doesn't even have the energy to look at

the papers she brought him. Without opening his eyes, he gropes for a pen and signs a bunch of illegible symbols. He waves at the ghostly man behind Wang Zheng. "No PDA in front of a lonely single man, fuck off!"

When Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng have finally finished up the preliminary report for Zhao Yunlan to sign and stamp, he has already been sleeping on his desk for a long while.

Da Qing wakes him up with a storm of mighty cat punches, and asks, "I forgot to ask, how's my super luxurious tree house with the bird-nest view going?"

Zhao Yunlan says, only half-conscious, "Fat fuck, I'm gonna kill you and eat your meat."

Da Qing pounces his shoulder and roars into his ears, "Meow!!! Jerk!!! Where's my luxurious cat house? Where's my luxurious cat house!?"

Zhao Yunlan stares at him blearily, then chugs down a cup of cooled water. He picks up the cat by his stumpy neck and throws him aside. He wipes his face and seems a little more awake. "It's basically done, if it goes through fast we can probably move by Autumn next year."

The black cat instantly drops his arrogant attitude and nudges his hand in flattery. "Well, well, our Chief is so capable! That... that nearby bird nest better have eggs in it..."

Zhao Yunlan flicks his cat brain away and wipes his hands.

"Fucking cat," he says coldly, "your fur is all over my hands."

He doesn't wait for Da Qing to get mad, just quickly signs the report and gets up. "I'm going then, thanks for your work, guys."

Chu Shuzhi asks, "Hey, wait, how did you get here?"

"Taxi. I'll take another one back."

Guo Changcheng kindly reminds him, "It's very late, and very cold outside, you might not be able to find a taxi. How about I dr... ow!!!"

Chu Shuzhi ruthlessly steps on his foot under the table before jumping up and pushing Zhao Yunlan back down into his chair. He snatches Zhao Yunlan's phone from his pocket like a thief.

"Professor Shen is probably on holiday, let me call him to pick you up."

Zhao Yunlan stares at him.

He's so weak, he doesn't even wonder who he's getting a ride home from!

Zhao Yunlan reaches up to grab his phone back, but Chu Shuzhi easily steps aside and tells Guo Changcheng, "Hey, go hold him in place, look at how drunk he is! Trust me, when he sees you in this condition, I don't believe Professor Shen will be able to resist you for much longer."

Zhao Yunlan is held in place by Guo Changcheng and Da Qing, the cat who just likes causing trouble... he even diligently sits on his stomach, almost suffocating their Chief.

Zhao Yunlan pleads, "Don't! I'm begging you, I won't cause any trouble!"

Chu Shuzhi raises his eyebrows, hearing Shen Wei's voice on the phone. "Yunlan? What is it?"

He picked up instantly, even a father might not be so attentive to his son's phone calls. Chu Shuzhi gestures to Zhao Yunlan: 'Chief Zhao, you're a badass! Why are you heartbroken?'

Chu Shuzhi coughs. "Oh, Professor Shen, it's me. Our Chief drank a lot tonight, he's hugging everyone he sees. The office is in chaos, you see, could I trouble you to come and pick him up?"

Zhao Yunlan grabs a pencil holder and hurls it at Chu Shuzhi's head. Chu Shuzhi dodges and continues, "No, nothing's wrong, it's just the drunk cat throwing things at me... right, we'll keep an eye on him. Please come as soon as you can, it's No. 4 Bright Avenue, second floor, Criminal Investigations. See you!"

Zhao Yunlan points at him. "You're a bunch of bitches!"

Da Qing swishes his tail. "Yup, we're bitches... what're you going to do about it, big stupid guy?"

Guo Changcheng is the most innocent accomplice, and under Chief Zhao's knife-sharp gaze, all he can do is learn from the ostriches and curl up into himself, shivering.

Not long after, Shen Wei arrives.

He has barely finished knocking once, when the door to the office is flung open and a body comes tumbling out. Shen Wei catches it and Zhao Yunlan falls right into his embrace.

Zhao Yunlan can't even stand properly, but he still has a fighting spirit. He points at Chu Shuzhi through the office door. "You little bitch, just you wait!"

Chu Shuzhi's usually bitter face suddenly wears a smile. "Ooh, I'm scared to death!"

Shen Wei doesn't know whether to cry or laugh. He pushes down Zhao Yunlan's trembling hand. "All right, all right."



Maybe Zhao Yunlan really is drunk, or perhaps he's just embarrassed in front of Shen Wei and uses Chu Shuzhi to divert attention. "Maybe not today, but I'll beat you up, and then you won't know how many eyes the Horse God has anymore!"

Then he struggles out of Shen Wei's grip and tries to lurch forward.

Shen Wei sighs, nodding towards the people inside the office. "Thank you, I'll take care of him."

He wraps his arm around Zhao Yunlan's waist, the other hand grabbing Zhao Yunlan's wrist, effectively stopping his quivering rant, and drags him off.

Da Qing stays at the door, staring after the two, deep in thought. Suddenly, he says, "I'm sensing the peculiar vibe of a reverse couple. Our Chief is such a slut, could it be... hey, homo sapiens, what do you think?"

Chu Shuzhi kicks his fat butt away.

## Chapter 49

Actually, Zhao Yunlan is feeling a rather unique sensation.

He really did drink too much, and he can't really walk straight. But he already threw up and took a nap, so he isn't quite as drunk anymore.

It's just that Chu Shuzhi exaggerated how drunk he is, and so he decides to play along. Pretending that he's utterly disoriented, he slumps into the front seat, seemingly dead to the world, feigning unconsciousness.

When Shen Wei went upstairs to pick him up, he left the car engine on to keep the heater running. Zhao Yunlan feels it as soon as he gets into the car.

Once Shen Wei has gotten in, too, he nudges him lightly. "Wake up, you can sleep back home. It's easy to catch a cold outside."

Zhao Yunlan plays dead.

He hears the man beside him sigh.

Shen Wei sees that he can't wake him up, so he leans over to put on his seat belt for him.

He's so incredibly close that Zhao Yunlan can smell Shen Wei's scent. It's different from when he's the Ghost Slayer. He smells of soap, and his clothes are probably freshly laundered... when the Ghost Slayer sheds his feared black cloak, there's actually such a clean and soft man underneath.

Shen Wei takes out a bottle of mineral water and pours some into a little cup. He swirls the liquid in a circle a few times, and the cold

water warms up, steam starting to rise from it. He holds the cup to Zhao Yunlan's mouth. "Drink some."

Zhao Yunlan opens his eyes a little. In the pitch black of the car, it seems that the only light is coming from Shen Wei's eyes. They're just perfect, neither too dark nor too bright.

Zhao Yunlan's heart suddenly skips a beat. He leans forward and guzzles down the cup of water from Shen Wei's hand. Then, Shen Wei takes out a blanket from underneath the seat and wraps him tightly in it. He turns up the heater some more, then drives off at a sedate speed.

Zhao Yunlan leans against the seat with his eyes closed, but he's awake. It's been a long time since he felt so warm on a cold winter's night.

Over half a month has passed since they've come back from the snowy mountains, and Zhao Yunlan has never contacted Shen Wei since.

But constantly bothering and following the object of his affection had become a bit of a habit, and it's always painful to change one's habits. Thus, Zhao Yunlan couldn't help using the end of the year activities as an excuse to go overboard. And although humans are social animals, too much socialising can wear anyone out.

It's not about looking perfect, sometimes it's just about feeling less lonely.

Men and women go after him, it has always been like that. When he's in a good mood, he likes engaging in the occasional ambiguous love affair, just to make himself feel better. But ever since he stopped contacting Shen Wei, he has started comparing everyone with him. And the more he did, the more disappointed he was... among all those people, none of them have the charisma of a well-educated

scholar, none of them have features that look as if they'd been lifted from a famous portrait.

Zhao Yunlan feels like he has turned into an old monk void of desires in just one night. One time during a dinner gathering, someone hired a young model that he always liked, but he was utterly uninterested... Da Qing can testify, there was a time when Zhao Yunlan was so perverted, he set a swimsuit picture of that model as his desktop background.

And whenever he's so drunk that he forgets what year it is, he thinks about the day he shamelessly coerced Shen Wei into taking him home to his place late at night because of his stomachache.

They watched movies together and talked occasionally. When he got bored of the old movies, he picked up some case files that he was working on. They each did their own thing and didn't disturb one another. And then, Shen Wei placed a pillow behind Zhao Yunlan's back.

It's a lifestyle that Zhao Yunlan has always dreamt of: two people who don't always have to talk, who won't annoy each other or demand a lot all day, things like movie dates or flowers. They live their own lives, but they're not distant... it's like they're meant to live together, just the two of them.

At his age, Zhao Yunlan is smart enough and experienced enough to realise that when a man looks at someone he likes and doesn't see *tiny waist, long legs, big butt*, but sees *home*, that's definitely not lust.

If it weren't for that, perhaps he would've treated it as a joke and ended it with the Ghost Slayer openly.

But he can't let go.

Whenever Zhao Yunlan remembers waking up to those eyes watching him in the middle of the night in the shabby house in the snowy mountains, he can't help but feel that if he ended things just like that, he would regret it for the rest of his life.

Zhao Yunlan's pigsty isn't far away from No. 4 Bright Avenue. He's still lost in his convoluted thoughts when they arrive. Shen Wei helps him get upstairs, takes off his jacket and hangs it aside nicely. He makes him lie down on the bed and heads to the washroom for a wet towel.

Though Zhao Yunlan seems to be drunk as mud, Shen Wei is incredibly well-behaved. He only wipes his face and limbs and avoids touching all other places, not even one millimetre. He wraps him in a blanket, sets the towel aside, and starts tidying up the trash by force of habit. He sets it next to the door so he can take it out when he leaves. Then, he begins picking up clothes that are scattered everywhere, gathering them into a laundry bag. He attaches a memo note to it, reminding Zhao Yunlan to send the clothes to the cleaner's the next day.

Attentive to every detail, he takes away the cup of water from the bedside table so that Zhao Yunlan won't knock it off in his sleep.

Zhao Yunlan listens to the rustling noise of the man tiptoeing around, tidying up the room, and not only does the knot in his heart not loosen up, it gets even more tangled.

Shen Wei has him in his heart, and Zhao Yunlan can feel it. All his life, besides his parents, other people always seemed to want something from him, or they wanted to use him. Never has anyone cared so deeply for him.

Well, Da Qing isn't a person, he's just a bad-tempered fat cat.

When Shen Wei is done, he realises that Zhao Yunlan, who was still half-consciously peeking at him a moment ago, now seems to be in

deep slumber, resting peacefully.

He seems so tranquil. Shen Wei hesitates, he doesn't want to leave. He stands beside the bed, unable to tear his gaze away.

*Fuck*, Zhao Yunlan thinks while pretending to be asleep. His blood rushing uncontrollably, he thinks, *Please stop looking, just go. This is killing me.*

But neither the Ghost Slayer nor the gods above hear his plea. After a while, Shen Wei bends down slowly, as if in a trance, leaning closer and closer to Zhao Yunlan, until he can feel his breath on his face.

Zhao Yunlan holds his corpse-like pretence with the strongest will possible. And yet, he can clearly feel that he's about to collapse.

Finally, Shen Wei can't hold back anymore. With his arms propped on the bed on either side of Zhao Yunlan, he brushes Zhao Yunlan's lips gently. Like a dragonfly dipping its tail in water, touching him for just a split second. Shen Wei closes his eyes, just one fleeting touch has given him immense satisfaction. His thundering heartbeat thumps through his physical body. For one instant, Shen Wei feels like a human. Under dim lights, stealing a kiss from someone he loves, joy and sweetness swelling up in his heart. Even if he died right now, he would have no objection.

All of a sudden, Zhao Yunlan's mind goes completely blank.

The thread in his heart that has been holding up countless tonnes of weight finally breaks, in just a flashing moment, and without a sound. Zhao Yunlan's intoxicated brain is suddenly wide awake. 'Ghost Slayer? So what if he's the Ghost Slayer? If I like him he's mine, to hell with everyone else!'

And so Zhao Yunlan, 'sound asleep' just a moment ago, suddenly wraps his arms around Shen Wei. Shen Wei has yet to realise what's

happening, and while he's thus shocked, Zhao Yunlan flips him over and bears down on him.

His breath still smells slightly of alcohol. And yet, his eyes are crystal clear, staring into Shen Wei's. He asks softly, "What are you doing, Your Honour?"

Shen Wei opens his mouth, but in his great embarrassment, there's nothing he can say.

Zhao Yunlan stares at him for a while, complex expressions flitting across his face. Suddenly, he pinches Shen Wei's chin lightly. "I always thought you were a gentleman, Your Honour, but who knew you're the kind who secretly steals a kiss in the middle of the night. And it was such an unprofessional kiss as well."

Then Shen Wei hears his muffled laughter.

Shen Wei is stupefied, until Zhao Yunlan's kisses come raining down. As though he were in an impossibly vivid dream, he can't help but embrace Zhao Yunlan's body, pulling him in tighter.

This man is incredibly adept at kissing. Frisky and flirtatious. Effortlessly, he strips Shen Wei of his armour, utterly vanquishing his defences.

And then, Zhao Yunlan pushes himself up a little. The two men are almost touching noses, and Shen Wei hears him whisper, "This is called professional level kissing."

Shen Wei is lost for words.

Two buttons are undone on Zhao Yunlan's shirt, revealing his slender and refined collar bones. A faint aftertaste of cologne wafts out, and that slight smell is all it takes to seal Shen Wei in silence. He can no longer tell who's really drunk now.

Zhao Yunlan sighs. He gently brushes away Shen Wei's messy fringe, "Let me ask you: you've been hiding from me for such a long time, but you always stayed close. Is it because we knew each other a long time ago and you did something terrible to me, or are you afraid that humans and ghosts aren't meant to be together?"

Shen Wei is stunned. His eyes become clear again, and he pushes Zhao Yunlan away and sits up. The blush fades from his skin, and his arms fall at his sides, hands tightening.

Zhao Yunlan sits, too, facing him sideways. He leans over and pulls Shen Wei's hand towards him. He slowly opens Shen Wei's clenched fist. "Look at you, why do you give yourself such a hard time? If it's the first reason, I'm telling you now: from now on, whatever happened in the past is completely written off. You won't mention it, and I'll never even remember. As for the second reason... isn't that bullshit? Humans die and become ghosts too, maybe someday I'll..."

Shen Wei quickly covers his mouth.

Two men, four eyes, they stare at each other for a long time. Finally, Shen Wei shakes his head, very, very slowly.

Zhao Yunlan sighs and gets out of bed. Judging by his words, he seemed sober, and yet he stumbles as soon as his feet touch the ground and promptly lands on his ass. Wrapping his hands around his head, he moans, "Fuck, there's a whole swarm of bees buzzing around my head."

Shen Wei makes haste to help him get up. "I thought you weren't drunk. Does it hurt?"

Zhao Yunlan is now in a peculiar state where he can think logically but not walk straight. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been so blunt and bold.



He shakes his head, kneels, and opens the bedside cupboard. He draws out a plastic folder from the bottom and slaps it on the bed in front of Shen Wei. "Open it."

Shen Wei hesitates, but then opens it. He finds a property contract for a house on University Road, near Dragon City University... Zhao Yunlan spent a tremendous amount of money on it. This explains why he has been so short on cash lately.

Zhao Yunlan hides his teasing smirk. He sits on the ground, leaning against the cupboard and stretching out his legs. He looks up and lights a cigarette.

He stays silent until almost the entire cigarette is gone, and then says in a low voice, "I bought it before we went to the mountains. I thought it was in a good neighbourhood and conveniently located. It's right next to the University, so if you wanted to move in with me, you wouldn't have to drive to work, and you could even sleep in a little later in the morning. Next year, I'll move the SIU office to somewhere nearby. The house is quite big, more than enough for the two of us. You could have a huge study or office, and you could bring your students over, I could invite some friends over sometimes... and I also thought about getting a big silly dog. I could provoke it to fight with Da Qing and we can watch Dog Versus Cat live, the New Year Edition..."

Shen Wei's hands start trembling uncontrollably, the plastic folder creaking in his fingers.

Zhao Yunlan chuckles. "Who would've thought that after going to the big Northwest, I'd find out it's you, Your Honour... you can get from East City to West City in the blink of an eye, why would you have to drive? And waking up in the morning? If I had known I wouldn't have spent unnecessary money, now I don't even have enough for New Year's gifts."

Shen Wei gradually lowers his head, and they lock eyes with each other. He finds this man's gaze the same as ever. The mischief has gone out of it, and all that's left is deeply, deeply hidden tenderness. With but the softest touch, like the brush of a tiny feather, he drowns in it.

Shen Wei is being split in halves: one half is over the moon with ecstasy, the other is sinking deep down into the abyssal depths of the Underworld. In just one moment, he finds himself on the verge of insanity.

Several thousand years of solitude, and yet he always remained sane. Just a few careless words from that man cause upheaval, havoc, tempest: unruly passion engulfs him.

No wonder the old saying goes like this: For love, the living can die and the dead can once again live. The living who fear death and the dead who cannot again live are those who haven't known enough love.

Mind and soul in utter disarray, who'd remember what day and what year it is?

## Chapter 50

Shen Wei's heart quakes and convulses, and he almost loses control.

Now he realises that in all those thousands of years, he's never been free of emotions or grievances. The things Zhao Yunlan said tonight have only ever appeared in his dreams. On one hand, he knows none of this will ever be possible, but on the other, he can't help but hope.

Hope is like a strand of spider silk, and his life depends on it.

He was born because of him, and the path he took to this day is all because of him.

The strongest of hearts cannot be defeated by the knives and blades that are the storms and blizzards of life. Instead, it happens when a helping hand comes out of nowhere, with a gentle whisper by the ear: "Come home."

For one moment, he really wants to ask: why does he have to be the Ghost Slayer?

Short-lived ants can come and go in pairs under the sun and dew, voyaging birds can find a nesting place among tree branches, and yet in all the Heavens and Earth, he's the only one of his kind. Why isn't there a place he can belong?

Everyone is frightened of him, respectful on the outside, but plotting his death behind his back.

He was born from chaos, brutality and menace. There's always a part of him that overflows with malevolence, wishing to slay all those people with his blade.

But that... no, he chooses to abide by a promise that only he remembers. Many thousands of years have passed already, and he never strayed, since that is the only thing left connecting him with the person to whom he gave his promise.

Zhao Yunlan watches Shen Wei's eyes redden, looking like they're about to start dripping blood.

Much later, Shen Wei shakes his head incredibly slowly.

Zhao Yunlan hears him whisper, "I'm bad luck, you will get hurt because of me."

A frivolous smile plays on Zhao Yunlan's lips, making two dimples emerge on his cheeks. "Sure, do you wanna try if your Attack is higher, or if I have more HP<sup>60</sup>? Hey, by your logic, I ought to marry a Maneki-neko<sup>61</sup> ! Damn... isn't that a bit too kinky?"

Shen Wei doesn't understand his humour, and doesn't reply. His fist is clenched to the point of almost drawing blood from his palm, and he finally says, "How can you... how can you pressure me like this?"

Zhao Yunlan's smile wears away, and he puts out the cigarette in an ashtray.

When he first saw Shen Wei, he fell for him instantly. He thought it was just that Shen Wei is the type he likes, but he neglected the sense of natural familiarity, the feeling of having met him before. Zhao Yunlan has yet to find out about the Ghost Slayer's past, but he cannot bear to ask him face to face.

Why does he always get the impression that Shen Wei is hiding so much suffering? Why does the air freeze every time he wears his black cloak?

Does he not feel the cold?

"Sorry." Zhao Yunlan stays silent for a while. He gently pries open Shen Wei's fist, placing the hand in his own open palm, and kisses the back of it gently. He carelessly tosses the expensive property contract aside.

Shen Wei shuts his eyes, feeling immensely disgraceful.

Why didn't he stay further away? Why didn't he hide in the depths of the Underworld? Then, no matter how many times Zhao Yunlan reincarnates, they would never have met and he would never have known of Shen Wei's existence. But he hadn't been able to help it, it had been unbearable.

He perceives himself very much like a shameless slut, standing seductively on the street corner, waiting for a customer, but putting on an honourable and upright pretence as soon as one arrives.

He has always felt a deep loathing of himself, but now it reaches a new height.

Zhao Yunlan lies down on the bed, massaging his temples, and says in a subdued voice, "I have other things, but you probably wouldn't want any of them. There's only one small thing: my heart... if you don't want to catch it, then forget about it."

These words bludgeon Shen Wei's heart like a rock. He's reminded of a long time ago, when someone spoke beside his ear, with the same ostensibly careless sigh and a profound tone that he rarely used, the following string of words: "I'm rich with the mountains and rivers of this world, but if you think about it, that's hardly worth relishing: just an old pile of pebbles and some wild creeks. There's probably only this one thing about me that's worth a little something: my heart. You want it? Take it."

The past is still present, flashing before his eyes.

All of a sudden, Shen Wei embraces Zhao Yunlan with all his might, so hard his bones creak, and buries his face in his neck.

When bold and unconstrained people suffer, they show their emotions, weeping in grief or howling at the heavens in despair.

But for Shen Wei, all he can do is sink his teeth into his own wrist over Zhao Yunlan's shoulder. It's hard to tell how much force was in that bite, but his wrist is streaming with blood instantly, and the wound almost reaches his bones.

Yet he doesn't seem to feel any pain.

The unending depth of the Underworld weighs down on him. He sheds no tears, so in his extreme agony, he can only shed his blood.

Zhao Yunlan picks up the smell of blood and immediately realises that something is wrong. "Shen Wei! What are you doing!? Let go!"

Shen Wei only locks him in place even tighter.

Men can only live for a few dozen years, a time that passes by so fast, no more than a flashing glint, a passing shadow. Shen Wei suddenly thinks: 'Why don't I deserve to have just this tiny fragment of time?'

"Shen Wei!" As Shen Wei is lost in thought, Zhao Yunlan finally struggles out of his arms and sits up. He finds his bed sheets are dyed red. Infuriated instantly, he almost censures Shen Wei as if he were Guo Changcheng. "Do you have shit for brains!? Yes I'm a motherfucking vulgar pig, but I would never force a guy against his will. You shook your head, and did I say anything? Did I say anything? Did you have to shed your own blood?"

Then, he grumpily pounces up, and tries to find the first-aid kit.

But Shen Wei suddenly grabs him.

"I caught it," Zhao Yunlan hears Shen Wei say, very softly.

Zhao Yunlan is stunned. But Shen Wei smiles, and with a greatly contrasting, eerily quiet tone, he continues, "I caught it. In your entire life, whether living or dying, dying or living, I will never let go anymore. Even if one day you become sick of me and want to leave, there's no way I will let you go. If I have to, I will strangle you to death in my arms."

Struck dumb, Zhao Yunlan blinks. It takes him a while to understand what Shen Wei means.

Now he finally smells a trace of the Ghost Slayer on 'Professor Shen'.

But Zhao Yunlan makes no comment about his sweet yet savage speech. He simply takes out his first-aid kit from underneath the bed. He finds an antiseptic wipe and sits on the edge of the bed, frowning as he pulls up Shen Wei's bloodied wrist and wipes off the blood stain that is as cold as the person it came from. He treats him tenderly, but his words aren't so pleasant. After a long while, Zhao Yunlan sighs, and comments, "Really, you're the worst."

Afterwards, Zhao Yunlan is probably exhausted to death. The SIU is filled with half humans, half ghosts, and not one of them is reliable. Zhao Yunlan is always busy, like he was born to labour hard every day. After he changes the bloodied sheets, he's in no mood for lovemaking anymore. He falls head first onto the bed, and shortly, his breathing evens out.

He really is sound asleep this time.

Shen Wei looks at his wrist, which is wrapped tightly and neatly. He lifts up the other half of the blanket, and, holding his breath, he lies down on the other side of the bed with incredibly gentle movements.

He holds Zhao Yunlan's hand against his chest and shuts his eyes.

Shen Wei never thought the day would come when he sleeps through the night. He has never been blessed with the sweetness of slumber, and he has never tasted a serene, dreamless night.

It's been too long since he last felt this blissful.

The next morning, weird smells from the kitchen awaken Shen Wei, and he's surprised and bewildered for half a minute before he remembers where he is. He sees the 'incriminating evidence' on his wrist, and his face that always seems to be pale blushes a light pink.

Look at the things he did, and the things he said last night!

He really... can't bear thinking back.

At that moment, someone mumbles, "Morning."

Shen Wei looks up and sees Zhao Yunlan holding a pair of chopsticks in his mouth. In his hands is a wide plastic tray, with five moulded slots, each big enough for a huge bowl or a moderate-sized plate.

Five slots, if there aren't a lot of people, that's just enough for the standard four dishes and a soup, and he can carry everything in just one trip.

What kind of sloth designed this godly tool, the world may never know.

And yet the godly tool in Zhao Yunlan's hands has other godly things on it. From left to right, a tidy queue of large-size instant cup noodles sits on the tray, steaming with a mix of indescribable odour.

Shen Wei gawks.



And so Zhao Yunlan uninhibitedly plops down onto the couch and starts lecturing: "First left is braised beef noodles, boiled in water, second left is old-altar pickled cabbage noodles, boiled in hot milk, in the middle is mushroom and chicken stew noodles, microwaved in water, with a knob of butter, second right is assorted seafood noodles, I found it a bit bland, so I added a spoon of sweet sauce, first right is bacon cream noodles, boiled in hot coffee... this one should be good. Pick whatever you like."

Then, he finally finds himself a little awkward, "Well, you see... I don't know how to make other things. You don't come over often, and I thought just making two instant noodles was a bit too embarrassing."

And so he made five... oh how generous of him.

Shen Wei glances across the five steaming cups of noodles. He cannot fathom how this man hasn't poisoned himself to death yet.

But luckily, even if he were to cook a bowl of arsenic, Shen Wei would eat it willingly without so much as a frown... but Professor Shen still chooses the bowl that looks the most normal, and subtly reminds him, "These greasy foods are bad for your health, don't eat too much."

Zhao Yunlan admits honestly, "I've run out of money lately. If I don't get my bonus, I'm gonna have to ask my dad for help."

As he's talking, he catches a glimpse of Shen Wei, and he just so happens to think of something, and says, all smiles, "A gold digger, and a bed warmer."

Shen Wei gags on a mouthful of spicy soup and coughs vigorously, turning his head away.

Zhao Yunlan chuckles and says carelessly, "It's almost the end of the year, the time for reviewing virtue is here again. Recently there are

more and more thieves on earth, the shifter tribes and ghosts are all scrambling last-minute."

Shen Wei sits up, poised, and wipes his mouth. He says calmly, "Deliberate deeds can only amount to superficial karma, how can good virtue be accrued so easily?"

"Yeah."

Zhao Yunlan seems to have impaired taste, guzzling down the god-awful mixture of coffee and instant noodle soup.

"Speaking of which, we actually have a case. You'd think they'd behave this time of year."

The Sundial of Reincarnation is the first of the Four Mystical Artefacts, then comes the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, and the third is the Ink Brush of Virtue. Now that the first two have surfaced, Shen Wei is understandably a little oversensitive towards the word 'virtue'.

But before he can ask, Zhao Yunlan's phone rings.

Zhao Yunlan hurriedly puts down the noodles to look at his phone. "Speak of the devil, here it is again."

Just one night, and there are two more victims who ended up in hospital.

The same symptoms: no illness, no injuries, just frantically jerking to and fro while holding their legs. The victim's family called the police at five o'clock in the morning, so the comrades in charge of the case had no choice but to crawl out of their beds.

Widespread poisoning has a severe impact on the well-being of society. The incident is worsening by the minute, and it just so happens to be the end of the year, when stability maintenance is

crucial. The chief of the district police has not a clue what to do, so Zhao Yunlan is harassed with death-threatening frequency.

Basically, Chu Shuzhi and the others have concluded that this case will sooner or later be handed to the SIU, anyway. They will send the report up in the morning, and then Zhao Yunlan won't be able to brush it aside.

But it's going to take one whole day, at least, before the procedures go through. Zhao Yunlan promises over the phone that he will go to the hospital to take a look today.



## Chapter 51

If you ask Zhao Yunlan, he only wants to take Shen Wei, he doesn't want to take any third wheel. But considering Da Qing's vigorous protest the other day, Zhao Yunlan squeezes out an ounce of responsibility from his brain full of rainbows, butterflies and unicorns, and gives Guo Changcheng a call, telling him to come along so he can teach him on the side, all fun and games... ah, no, of course it's practical training for the newcomer.

Pitiful little officer Guo Changcheng... it's been over half a year since he first started working for the SIU, but he still knows next to nothing. Now there's finally a whiff of basic training for him.

Guo Changcheng is a responsible and diligent kid, and naturally, he wouldn't make the Chief wait for him. As soon as he gets the phone call, he rushes out at the speed of light, and sprints towards the subway station to avoid morning traffic. He tries to get on board at the busiest station, but is crammed out of the carriage twice. Third time's the charm: a fierce old lady gives him a kick from behind, and he's jammed inside just before the doors close.

All soaked in sweat, Guo Changcheng arrives at the hospital, and realises he's there too early. The day-shift doctors are only just arriving at work. As for their Chief, well, he's still caught up in whatever paradise he calls home sweet home.

Guo Changcheng rubs his hands together, pulls up his shoulders, and waits in the freezing winter of Dragon City for more than two hours. He uses up a whole pack of tissues for his runny nose, and his whole body almost crystallises into a snowflake. Finally, the long-awaited Zhao Yunlan arrives... oh, and Professor Shen, too.

Guo Changcheng is so cold that he can't speak clearly anymore: "Chi... Chi chi chi chi chi chi- Chief Zhao."

Zhao Yunlan is rather amused by his appearance. "When did you arrive? How long have you been waiting?"

"Al... almost three hours."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't ask things like, "Why didn't you call me?" or "Why didn't you go inside?" He's not surprised. If Guo Changcheng weren't stupid, would he still be Guo Changcheng?

Shen Wei on the other hand is quite surprised. "Why didn't he go inside if he got here early?"

Zhao Yunlan locks the car and carelessly tosses the car keys into Guo Changcheng's arms. He chuckles. "He doesn't dare."

Bingo. Guo Changcheng shamefully sucks up a trickle of snot and glances at Shen Wei.

Shen Wei sees it and says patiently, "Good morning. Have you had breakfast?"

Guo Changcheng nods, and at the same time thinks, his brain in disarray: Why is Chief Zhao bringing 'family' to work?

On the face of it, this must be a mistake on the part of the Chief. And yet, Guo Changcheng can't help but feel like a gargantuan third wheel. Greatly embarrassed, as he sees Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan whispering to each other, he only dares to stand three steps away, head drooping and shoulders sagging. His frozen face looking all the more miserable, he's like a small eunuch following in their footsteps.

It's influenza season, and the hospital is too crowded to begin with. Since Guo Changcheng is trying to keep his distance, swarms of people quickly pass and surround him. He tries to wriggle his way

through the crowd, pushing himself up onto his toes, searching for the other two men. But when he finally manages to bust out of the horde, Zhao Yunlan and Shen Wei are nowhere to be seen.

Luckily, he has been here once before, so he knows to go upstairs to the in-patient ward.

As he arrives on the sixth floor, some doctors and nurses are hurriedly pushing a patient past him, and Guo Changcheng quickly steps aside to make way.

He tilts his body and accidentally looks towards a window.

Having witnessed 'filthy things' on reflective surfaces several times before, Guo Changcheng has developed a mental block. He now makes a habit of closing the curtains and turning on the TV as soon as he gets home, covering the reflective tabletop with a tablecloth, and only ever opening the laptop when he's using it.

But now all it takes is a single careless glance and Guo Changcheng's eyes are drawn to the window pane.

He sees a person outside the window, six floors up. He's male, and slender, and wearing a shabby beanie. Underneath it, weathered ears and white hair can be seen. He's wearing an equally shabby cotton-padded jacket.

Instinctively, Guo Changcheng senses his eccentricity. His heart begins beating rapidly, and yet sometimes, the more terrified you are, the harder it is to look away.

As Guo Changcheng slowly looks down, his mouth drops open, and a look of extreme horror emerges on his face... the man he sees is floating in mid-air, and he has no legs!

The man's legs are cut off near the pelvis; on the narrow window, Guo Changcheng can clearly see the irregular wound: a short

segment of bone protrudes from within the rotten flesh, and it's... it's still bleeding! Blood oozes out of the gaps of the window frame, dripping onto the floor, gathering into a small puddle, like it'll never stop flowing.

But the doctors and nurses passing by don't seem to notice.

The legless man glares quietly at the in-patient ward, half his face covered in dirt and blood. His eyes are popping out and his face is void of expression, like a frightening wax figure. All he does is creepily eye the people that come and go, tilting up his parched and cracked lips slightly to one side, wearing an inexplicably resentful, mirthless smile...

Right at that moment, a hand forcefully pats on Guo Changcheng's shoulder out of nowhere, and his fear reaches a level so high he can't even scream. He only leaps up silently, his eyes dilate, and even his breathing stops. His heart hammers in his chest, skipping a beat.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Guo Changcheng feels a surging urge to pee.

Luckily, he realises in time that it's Zhao Yunlan who's patting him on his shoulder, and so he forces the urine back inside.

Zhao Yunlan sees his pale and petrified face, and his awkward hunched and cross-legged posture, and frowns. "What's up with you now?"

Guo Changcheng opens his mouth, attempting to explain, but his brain is a blank slate. He's still trapped in his mute state. Unable to form words, all he can do is raise his trembling hand and point towards the window at the end of the corridor.

Zhao Yunlan tilts his head with suspicion and his gaze follows Guo Changcheng's finger... the window isn't particularly clean, but not



particularly filthy either. Besides a little dirt and tiny ice crystals, there's nothing to see.

Zhao Yunlan asks, puzzled, "What did you see?"

As Guo Changcheng looks up again, still in his panicked state, he's shocked to find the window completely blank; he cannot see anything.

He frantically glances around, making sure no-one is looking, and lowers his voice, speaking on the verge of tears, "I saw a man floating outside the window... no, half a man, his legs were cut off, blood dripping from the gaps of the window and spilling everywhere."

Zhao Yunlan looks at him and frowns. Guo Changcheng forcefully sucks a trickle of snot back up into his nose, still sporting the same silly face that has "come bully me" written all over it.

Zhao Yunlan knows he isn't lying. From what he knows of Guo Changcheng, he finds it highly unlikely that he has the intellect to pull off the demanding task of 'lying to the Chief'.

He heads for the window, but his revealing watch doesn't respond, calmly ticking off second after second. Zhao Yunlan touches the window sill and pushes at the slightly rusted window, opening it just a small gap. A chilling northwesterly wind comes gushing in.

Yet it's just a breeze. Besides chill, he doesn't feel anything.

Not long after, a young nurse comes running towards Zhao Yunlan standing by the window and protests, "Excuse me, mister, will you please close the window? If you need fresh air please go outside. There are patients here, and you're letting all the warm air out."

Zhao Yunlan closes the window, turns around, and gives the young nurse a smile and an apologetic nod.

The girl is stunned by his extreme handsomeness and fails to respond. After a while, her face reddens, she feigns a discontented mumble, and rushes off.

Shen Wei, having returned not long ago, can't hold back anymore. He turns to the side and coughs, intentionally leaning in to obstruct the girl's line of sight as she turns back to stare.

Zhao Yunlan glances at him with half a smile and gently pulls on his scarf. Leaning forward, he whispers into Shen Wei's ear, "Did you catch a cold? Why are you coughing?"

Shen Wei hastily steps backwards. The look on his face and his movements make Zhao Yunlan suspect that if he'd been wearing a traditional robe, he would've flicked his sleeves and lowered his head, reciting, "In broad daylight, men shall not stand too close."

He can't help but laugh under his breath.

"What are you looking at?" His ears reddening, Shen Wei awkwardly changes the subject.

Zhao Yunlan glances at Guo Changcheng, who stands far far away, refusing to go anywhere near the window under any circumstances. He summarises briefly what happened.

Shen Wei mulls it over, then lowers his voice. "Logically speaking, he shouldn't have a third eye. But it's strange. I think he may be able to look at a reflective surface and see what happened there."

Zhao Yunlan frowns, "How so?"

Shen Wei says, "Do you remember the first time we met at Dragon City University, I suddenly appeared and interrupted him? Actually, the night before, I heard that something happened, and suspected that it was related to the escaped hungry ghost. I sent a puppet to investigate the dorm room of the victim. The puppet left before

sunrise. But when this young man climbed up to the window sill, he and my puppet suddenly had a strange connection. I was afraid of blowing my cover, so I had to stop him... it's just that I didn't know you were there."

That day, someone, by unknown means, had cut off his sense of Zhao Yunlan's whereabouts.

Guo Changcheng's report did mention seeing a skull on the window, and something along the lines of "a figure in a black cloak in the eyehole of the skull." But Zhao Yunlan had only skimmed through the report and deemed ninety percent of it fabricated bullshit, and so he'd used the report as a drink coaster... he never expected Guo Changcheng could write anything useful.

"Which means that last night, there was a legless man... or a ghost, peeking in through the window?"

Shen Wei lowers his voice even further. "Didn't you say these two were sent in in the middle of the night? If I had a plan to hurt people, I'd probably come see for myself what happened to them."

Zhao Yunlan smirks. "Oh you wouldn't hurt anyone, even when you kiss someone you do it so secretively..."

Shen Wei cannot get used to whispering in each other's ears, and even touching on such a private subject in the eyes of the public. His face reddens instantly, and he bursts out, "Stop that nonsense!"

Zhao Yunlan shuts his mouth. But a slut is still a slut, even with his mouth closed. He uses his gaze to invade and sexualise, and he does it skillfully and with great experience.

Finally, Shen Wei can't stand being eyed up and down any longer and turns around, heading to the room with long strides.

As the three awkwardly approach the patients' room, Guo Changcheng realises that the bestial solo lament from the other night has turned into a duet, and the first victim isn't here anymore.

A sad-looking police officer in a uniform cap comes out and shakes Zhao Yunlan's hand, as welcoming as the Fourth Red Front Army meeting the Second Red Front Army in victory all those years ago. He says with great anguish, "You must be Chief Zhao? My name's Li. Our Chief sent me, and I've been waiting for you all day."

Zhao Yunlan asks, "Where's the victim from yesterday?"

Officer Li says, "He's almost dying, sent to the ICU. The hospital is about to send these two over there as well."

Zhao Yunlan asks, "How is he almost dying?"

Officer Li says, "He was screaming through the day, gasping like a fish on dry land. Then his eyes widened, and he couldn't speak anymore. He fell into a coma, quivering occasionally, and he can't feel anything in his legs... is this really poisoning? All these years I haven't come across a drug that can put someone in this state."

"Maybe it really isn't poisoning." Zhao Yunlan shoots him a glance.

Officer Li finds his gaze dark and hollow, as if it contains some kind of intuition. Officer Li trembles.

Zhao Yunlan pats him on the shoulder. "After all, the doctors at the hospital haven't drawn a conclusion yet, anything is possible... you work on moving them first, I'll talk to the victim and figure out what's up."

## Chapter 52

Doctors, nurses, and the victims' relatives are ushered out by Officer Li, and only the two victims are left complementing each other in a screeching duet.

Zhao Yunlan glances at the two, and the first thing he does is lift his fist and knock one of them unconscious. He asks Guo Changcheng, "Did you bring a notebook?"

Guo Changcheng nods eagerly.

"Take notes, then." Zhao Yunlan bends down, and asks the other victim, "Miss, do your legs hurt?"

The victim is a middle-aged woman. She thrashes about in pain, and the medical staff had to tie her to the bed. She nods with watery eyes.

Zhao Yunlan takes out a wallet, but this 'wallet' doesn't have cash or credit cards in it. He opens it, and inside is a thick pile of yellow paper talismans.

Zhao Yunlan flips through the talismans, explaining to Guo Changcheng, "Paper talismans are very important tools. You have to keep them organised, according to their categories... ones used for attacking, ones used for exorcism, and so on... otherwise when you need them you won't be able to find what you want. Learning how to use them is also a difficult subject..."

Heedless of the pig-slaughter screams of the victim, the Chief starts giving a slow-paced lecture.

Guo Changcheng doesn't have that kind of mental strength. He can't hear a word, all his attention is diverted by the miserable victim.

"Let's talk about her," Zhao Yunlan continues, like a medical professor giving his students a lecture with the help of a corpse. He steps closer and flips up the woman's ear, "You don't have a third eye, so you can't see her virtue. A very basic talisman can do the job for you."

He takes out a paper talisman and shows it to Guo Changcheng. "It's called the third eye's talisman."

Guo Changcheng hesitates before reaching for it, and Zhao Yunlan slaps the talisman squarely onto Guo Changcheng's forehead, right between his eyebrows. "Like this."

Guo Changcheng is slapped with a talisman like a zombie, and he instantly feels an inexplicable chill surging from the talisman. As if with great weight, a force enters his forehead, and the world before his eyes changes... but exactly what changed, he can't really say.

"Come take a look," Zhao Yunlan waves him closer.

Guo Changcheng looks down, and he shockingly realises that the victim is shrouded in a dark mist. Her weathered look has turned unspeakably creepy, with a hint of impending death. Her legs, though unharmed, are engulfed in black smoke, looking as though they were cut off irregularly.

Guo Changcheng looks at the woman's ear. He sees a big black mark behind her ear, not a very deep colour, but dusky, and covering almost her entire neck, like an eerie birthmark.

"A black mark behind the ears, that's a sign of bad virtue," Shen Wei suddenly says from behind Guo Changcheng. "The Book of Life and Death holds records of a person's virtue. Whenever a person commits a bad deed, small ghosts will leave a black hand print behind their ear. The darker the colour, the more culpable the deed. In this case here, none of the marks are very deep, but the area is

large, which means she never did anything too out of line, but she's selfish and does small evil frequently."

Shen Wei pauses before adding, "But of course, this is not punishable by death. Putting her in such a state is not justifiable."

Guo Changcheng nods modestly. But then he realises he might be nodding to the wrong person. He quickly looks at Professor Shen, and his expression changes, as if he were seeing an alien.

"The heck you staring at?" Zhao Yunlan turns his head around. "He's a veritable sage. I was blind not to have realised it sooner."

As he hears this, Guo Changcheng turns from surprised to astonished, and greatly admires this 'sage' the Chief speaks of.

Then, Zhao Yunlan takes out another talisman, and again puts it in front of Guo Changcheng for him to observe. "This is a simple exorcism talisman. It's very basic, so sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Of course, when it doesn't work, then at least we have an idea of how strong the opponent is."

Guo Changcheng says nothing.

He doesn't want to know how the woman must be feeling hearing this.

As Zhao Yunlan sticks the yellow paper talisman onto the woman on the bed, Guo Changcheng, with the help of the artificial third eye, sees a massive cloud of black smoke spouting out like a geyser, surging up and rebounding from the ceiling. From within emerges a distorted face, mouth agape, howling with all its might.

Just like that, the lecture has turned into haunted mansion horror. Guo Changcheng yelps and reflexively runs for the door. However, Chief Zhao pulls him back by the collar without looking, as though he has eyes in the back of his head.

Zhao Yunlan calmly holds Guo Changcheng with one hand, and with the other in his pocket, he locks eyes with the... thing floating mid-air. He mutters, "That's strange, why is there so much resentment?"

Guo Changcheng screams, "Ghost! Gh-gh-gh-ghost!!!"

Zhao Yunlan snickers. "Yeah, how surprising, like you've never seen a ghost before? If there weren't any ghosts here, I wouldn't have asked you to come."

"It hurts people! It's an evil ghost!" As Guo Changcheng squeals, a strong surge of electricity bursts out from his pocket. Luckily, Zhao Yunlan already has experience with this. He lets go and dodges the mighty weapon he created, and the floating shadow is vaporised with the same power seen in the Hanga's cave.

Now that it's all over, Zhao Yunlan puts on an all-knowing air. "I haven't asked it anything yet, who told you to kill it!?"

He waits for the smoke to disperse, and slaps Guo Changcheng on the back of his head.

Guo Changcheng, his eyes brimming with tears, looks at Zhao Yunlan. "I... I was scared..."

"Why couldn't you hold back for a while?" There are always idiotic chiefs who like to demand the humanly impossible of their staff.

Unfortunately, Guo Changcheng is a die-hard fan of his Chief, and he has always respected and feared him at the same time. Even if Zhao Yunlan uttered the greatest nonsense, he would probably regard it as law and find the Chief's nonsense eminently sensible.

Guo Changcheng follows his orders and begins holding back his fear. He stands in place in silence as his face reddens, and yet his



internal organs are still trembling, and he wheezes in a faint voice. "I... I really can't hold it."

Zhao Yunlan gives him the side-eye, but Guo Changcheng cannot figure out what that means and keeps trembling in fear. He almost fires off another jolt of electricity, when the heartless Chief suddenly laughs, "You're so amusing."

Guo Changcheng stays silent.

He finds this rather weird praise.

Shen Wei has been watching the two of them. He finally says, "Don't bully him."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't say anything else, instantly displaying the good quality of 'listening to one's wife'. He lets go of Guo Changcheng and stands upright. The sheer speed of his movements shows how well-trained he is; he can probably enter the next round of the 'National Canine Championships'.

The woman on the bed has calmed down. Witnessing the whole process petrified her for a long time. Now that she regains her senses, she struggles to get up, kneels on the bed, and bows towards Guo Changcheng. "Thank you angel, thank you little angel!"

Guo Changcheng is greatly embarrassed.

"No no no, I, I, I..." he stutters, his face and ears blushing red. His mind goes blank in the face of a stranger, and the stun baton in his pocket crackles. A spark discharges, and Zhao Yunlan's coat almost catches fire.

Guo Changcheng quickly shuts his mouth. As he feels more at ease, he also realises how Wonder Boy must have felt.

Zhao Yunlan gets serious, pulls up a chair, and sits down. He waves towards the woman on the bed. "Alright, stop bowing now. I have a few questions for you, please cooperate."

The middle-aged woman quickly nods.

"Last night you ate an orange you bought on the street, and then ended up in hospital?"

"Yes. It was nighttime. I went to the supermarket, and when I came out I saw someone selling oranges by the road."

"Hold on; did you see the fruit vendor when you were heading to the supermarket?" Zhao Yunlan interrupts.

The woman considers this, and then says uncertainly, "Probably... not? Most likely no, I was out to buy fruits, I would've noticed him."

So it was waiting for her intentionally.

"The person selling fruits, did you see their face?"

"Uh... a man, slender, wearing a shabby beanie... and, and a dusty grey jacket, I think?"

"What about his legs?" Zhao Yunlan asks.

"Legs?" The woman is taken aback, but after a while, she says, "Oh, right! I remember. There was a problem with his legs. He was limping and walked with difficulty. I didn't think of it until you mentioned it. He was probably a cripple with a fake leg, no?"

She doesn't wait for Zhao Yunlan's response and starts a running commentary. "I tell you what I think, Great Saint: the crippled and the dumb and the handicapped, none of them are good people. Their bodies are incomplete, so their minds become messed up. They're poisoning people, isn't that insane? I think these people should all be

locked up and monitored, after all they can't live normal lives anyway, all they do is disturb society."

Zhao Yunlan's frown deepens. He finally knows what caused the huge black mark behind her ears. Some people are born wicked, every pore on their skin oozes small evils. None of it fatal, but all of it hurtful.

The woman continues, "Like the deaf guy in our neighbourhood. He can't get a woman, and so he got a crappy dog. As soon as he opens the door, I can hear the dog barking and barking. He's deaf, so of course he can't hear it, and he just lets his dog bark. I should've bought that rat poison much sooner, that thing didn't die soon enough..."

Zhao Yunlan is growing impatient. He looks up and stares into the woman's eyes. Without sympathy, he controls her mind by force, and the babbling woman's eyes instantly go blank. Then, her eyes roll back and she falls unconscious.

Zhao Yunlan expressionlessly rattles off right next to her ear, "You ate something spoiled, but you went to the toilet just now and expelled all of it. Oh, and you lost your balance and fell into the toilet. The stink on your body won't go away no matter how hard you wash..."

Shen Wei hears him getting out of line, and pointedly coughs.

"Uh, although you now reek like a pile of shit, you've recovered from your food poisoning. In the afternoon, some handsome policemen came to ask about the guy who sold you the poisoned oranges, just standard police business. And while they were here, they also taught someone's filthy mind a little moral lesson..."

Shen Wei coughs again.

"That's all, reflect on your conscience." Zhao Yunlan shuts up as per Shen Wei's request, and as he's walking out of the room behind the others, he turns around and smirks. "I hope you have nightmares, old woman."

Shen Wei pulls him out, afraid that he might narrate The Ring right into her ears.

"She clearly doesn't know the poisoner." As soon as Zhao Yunlan has left the room, he enters into teaching mode for Guo Changcheng again. "The Line of Karma under her eyelids isn't deep. Though I also find her incredibly annoying, it's quite unlikely that a dog sold her poisoned oranges. In my experience, poisoners usually hurt random people."

He stops there and looks at Guo Changcheng, who's rapidly scribbling across the pages. He slows down, waits for Guo Changcheng a little, and continues as though without a care, "If the old woman is directly related to the poisoner... say she killed him, and he's back for revenge, then there's nothing we can do. Human laws forbid revenge, but the order of Karma and Yin and Yang doesn't."

Guo Changcheng hastily nods.

"But considering what the victim said, she clearly doesn't know the guy. And since the Line of Karma is light, their only connection is probably something trivial like bumping into each other on the street. Of course, there could be something more. But most likely, the evil ghost is deliberately hurting people. In that case, not only can we capture the ghost, we can execute it on the spot."

Guo Changcheng subconsciously pats the pocket with his stun baton in it. There's a twitch at the corner of Zhao Yunlan's mouth, and a twinge in his balls.

"Okay, so I'll go to the ICU to check on the even more unlucky one."

He looks to Shen Wei, who nods knowingly. "I'll take care of the other victim."

Zhao Yunlan smiles at Shen Wei like the breeze of spring. Then he turns around and switches to a menacing look towards Guo Changcheng. "You go, call Zhu Hong and tell her to contact the authorities. I want to be the lead on this case by tonight... and don't dawdle. If I see you dawdling, I'm gonna kick your ass. Faster!"

Professor Shen, the only one who can stand up for him, is gone, so Guo Changcheng covers his butt and runs off to do his job.

## Chapter 53

Past four o'clock in the afternoon, but before sunset, Zhu Hong rushes to the hospital with a formally approved letter of authorisation. "The police from the district branch have all been called back. Just now I ran into Xiao Li downstairs, and he said he would treat us to dinner later, so..."

Zhu Hong stops there and swallows the rest down when she sees Shen Wei walking towards them with a drink. She pauses and switches to a more subtle tone. "Now the case is entirely up to us, what do you think we should do?"

Shen Wei senses the doubt in her eyes, quickly shoves the drink into Zhao Yunlan's hand, and says considerately, "You get to work, I'll leave you alone."

Zhao Yunlan grabs him and shows his true nature, that of a sticky candy: "I'm not letting you go. What if you change your mind, and I can't find you anymore after you're gone?"

There are always passers-by in the corridors of the hospital. Besides, Zhao Yunlan is tall, well-built and handsome, so he has always been quite an eye-catcher. Not to mention now he's getting handsy and intimate with another man. Soon there are curious eyes staring.

Shen Wei quickly glances around and whispers, "We're still outside. Be careful."

Hearing this, Zhao Yunlan immediately turns towards the people, staring right back at them, and says without a care, "Whatcha looking at? Never seen handsome gay guys before?"

They really haven't seen one so bossy and full of himself. They turn away, embarrassed.

Zhao Yunlan tries to ingratiate himself with Shen Wei, turning to him. "Hee hee hee."

Shen Wei is speechless.

Zhu Hong cannot believe this idiotic guy is supposed to be their brave and formidable Chief Zhao. Her raging heart withers until only four words are left: what an appalling sight!

But Shen Wei frowns lightly and says, "You are working, it is not very appropriate for me to stay."

Zhu Hong whispers, "Yeah, Chief Zhao, we have regulations..."

Zhao Yunlan interrupts, "I set the regulations, if I don't like them I can change them anytime... besides, the regulations only state we shouldn't let outsiders witness anything or participate, but he's not an outsider."

Shen Wei is stunned. For a moment, he thinks Zhao Yunlan is about to reveal his identity.

But Zhao Yunlan lowers his voice, and says to Zhu Hong with a smug face, "He's my 'wife'<sup>62</sup>."

Shen Wei is left speechless again.

Zhu Hong turns towards the window after a moment of silence, and with a monotonous voice much like saying, "the number you've dialled isn't in service," she says to Guo Changcheng, "Xiao Guo, look, the sunset is so green! It looks like it was marinated in vinegar!"<sup>63</sup>

Guo Changcheng rubs his eyes.

Zhao Yunlan coughs dryly, smoothes his expression, and resumes his composure as the Chief. "Alright... Zhu Hong, call the guys, I want the whole team here. Especially Lin Jing! That callous geezer left very early last night, and today I'll have him know the consequences."

Zhu Hong hums in acknowledgement and turns around to send a message to everyone in criminal investigations at No. 4 Bright Avenue: "Come to Yellow Stone Temple Hospital, have a look at our bastard Chief's smug face."

And so everyone rushes to the hospital before the sky is dark. And yet there's nothing for them to see, just Zhao Yunlan sitting there like a boss, ordering everyone around: "Lao Chu, go to the rooftop and set up a 'net' with two layers, one way in, no way out; don't let him escape. Xiao Guo, follow him and write me a learning report. Zhu Hong, go and set up 'alarms' on all doors and windows. Isolate this area, turn it into your zone, make sure nobody enters by accident. Make it clean, don't leave any traces... Da Qing will help with that."

Da Qing has been listening to Lin Jing, who's whispering, "Look at Professor Shen's hand, it's wrapped in gauze. Just how much of a beast is our Chief?"

When it hears its name spoken with that thought in mind, Da Qing shivers.

Shen Wei uncomfortably pulls down his sleeve.

"As for Lin Jing..." Zhao Yunlan takes out a small bottle, and Lin Jing has an ominous inkling.

Zhao Yunlan smiles cunningly and says to Lin Jing, "In here is a piece of resentment taken from one of the victims."



Chu Shuzhi explains to the clueless newcomer, "All evil ghosts are born from resentment. Traces of resentment will be left on people they make contact with, and they stay connected to the ghost, like tentacles. Since they're made of the same stuff, the ghost will react to it."

Guo Changcheng has been following Zhao Yunlan around all day, and he hasn't had dinner. As he hears this, somehow he thinks of grilled octopus balls. His mouth waters and his stomach growls.

Chu Shuzhi is left speechless. Sometimes he really can't understand what this newbie loser is thinking all day.

Zhao Yunlan crosses his legs and throws the bottle to Lin Jing. "We killed one today by accident but the ghost didn't show up; probably couldn't, during the day. Now in the evening, I'm afraid it won't fall for the trap, either. So your mission is to wait until it's dark, crush the tentacle inside, and lure the evil ghost into Zhu Hong's zone."

Lin Jing silently looks at him and then at the small bottle in his hand. Realising he's to become a human ghost attractor, he announces with the emotional weight of a speaker at a funeral, "You're using me as bait."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't miss a beat. "Yeah, so what?"

He can so openly admit to his immorality, everyone can see that he's above reproach!

Lin Jing looks around and only sees the black cat's cunning sneer. The others' vacant expressions are void of sympathy; despair rises up within him.

The fake monk suddenly turns around and pounces towards Shen Wei, who has been quietly standing against the wall, "The King wants to use me as a sacrifice, please save me, Queen!"

Shen Wei is speechless.

When he's the Ghost Slayer, whoever sees him behaves like a mouse seeing a cat. He has never been joked with like that, and doesn't know how to respond. As though seeking help, he turns towards Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan finds this especially flattering and amusing. He looks the other way.

Shen Wei pauses for a thought and reaches for the bottle. "Then how about I go?"

Even before Shen Wei finishes speaking, Lin Jing realises what'll go wrong. Of course, he instantly feels two glaring eyes piercing straight through his spine from behind. The gaze comes with a force that seems to pin him to the wall and slash him with a thousand daggers.

Lin Jing laughs dryly, and snatches the bottle back. He walks away, hastily pronouncing, "Amitabha. Battling evil and protecting the lives and property of the people is our responsibility. It's a glorious and daunting mission, how can I abandon it? I'm going."

The fake monk runs away at the speed of light.

Shen Wei asks, "So what can I do to help?"

"Oh," Zhao Yunlan says, "I know there's a decent restaurant nearby, you can have dinner with me."

Shen Wei is stuck in embarrassed silence.

Zhu Hong grits her teeth. "Argh, but what can you say to that?"

Chu Shuzhi drops his head. "Yes, what can you say?"

Da Qing meows.

Guo Changcheng really dares not say anything.

Luckily Professor Shen is kind-hearted, and he sees the look on everyone's faces and hears their unspoken thoughts, so he shakes his head. "How is that appropriate? How about this: you stay here, and I'll help you guard the Life Door. If anything happens, I can help."

After hearing this, everyone is silent.

Zhu Hong instantly looks at Shen Wei with very complex emotions, and even Chu Shuzhi is lost in thought. But Guo Changcheng stupidly asks for clarification, "What's the Life Door?"

Chu Shuzhi ignores him, gets serious, and asks, "How does Professor Shen know what formation my two layers of 'net' will be in?"

Shen Wei smiles lightly. "'Two Layers, Four Doors, Eight Trigrams; Life Door, one way in, Death Door, no way out.' I figured it out from the surveillance spots Yunlan pointed out... Only if the evil ghost is too strong, it might break the 'net'. If the Life Door becomes a Death Door, then the formation will lose control. I will stand by the Guarding Eye, just in case."

As he finishes, he nods towards everyone politely, and then looks at Zhao Yunlan. Bending down slightly, he lowers his voice and says, "I'm going then, you be careful."

Zhao Yunlan sees him out, feeling great.

This time neither Zhu Hong nor Chu Shuzhi are using what Shen Wei said to tease Zhao Yunlan, they both turn towards him. The black cat Da Qing lies on the window sill, watching Shen Wei as he walks by outside the hospital and comes to stand precisely on the 'spot'. It even seems like he already knows Da Qing is watching; he looks up at it and smiles.

Da Qing's eyes sparkle. "An expert."

Zhu Hong lowers her voice, her eyebrows tightening. "Chief Zhao, who's this Professor Shen?"

Zhao Yunlan is in a splendid mood, and doesn't mind her tone. He says half-jokingly, "You wouldn't want to know."

Da Qing turns around and stares at him with emerald eyes. "So you know?"

Zhao Yunlan lazily leans back in his chair and asks with a fake smile, "Is there anything I don't know?"

Zhu Hong bursts out, "I found it strange a long time ago... he was there during the first case with the Sundial, and then the second time he just so happened to be with us in the mountains where the Awl was. Dragon City is so big, I don't even recognise all my neighbours, how can this be possible? Don't you think those are too many coincidences? You..."

Zhao Yunlan blinks. He didn't think Zhu Hong would get so agitated.

Even Chu Shuzhi silently watches her.

"Oh, about the Four Artefacts, there really is a reason behind that." Zhao Yunlan pauses. "But I think he probably doesn't want you to know, so I can't tell you anything about him. Please understand."

So the man who considers himself brothers with the gods above says, "Please understand." Zhu Hong is unmoved. What she's feeling is inexplicable.

If Shen Wei were just an ordinary professor from Dragon City University, then she could joke about these two with Lin Jing and the gang, tease the Chief, and even write stories about them on Weibo.

Yet now that she knows Shen Wei isn't so ordinary... and he might even have a lot in common with them, she's feeling torn.

She feels like someone has pierced her heart with a fine needle, pushing it in until a liquid starts painfully oozing out.

Chu Shuzhi asks, "Then is he an expert in formation? Maybe we can discuss that when we're free?"

Da Qing raises its tail and asks doubtfully, "So this time you're not involved with a normal human, what're you gonna do? Even if you can't tell us, at least let us know which tribe he's from?"

Zhu Hong is still frowning solemnly... as if Zhao Yunlan didn't just find a partner but a sugar daddy.

Finally, Zhao Yunlan's short-lived good temper crumbles in the face of their vehement questions, and he waves them off impatiently. "Go do your jobs! Fuck off! Why are you so nosy? Did I say this is a press conference?"

Chu Shuzhi runs off with Guo Changcheng, full of excitement; he decides to construct an impeccable net tonight... better not slip up in front of an expert.

Zhu Hong still wants to say something, but Da Qing jumps down from his chair and turns around, meowing at her. Zhu Hong takes a deep breath, looks down, her fists clenching inside her sleeves, and silently follows Da Qing.

Zhao Yunlan senses Zhu Hong's subtle hostility, but he doesn't mind... he thinks that women are particularly attentive to details and also particularly prone to thinking too much. He suddenly brought someone like Shen Wei into their circle, and without any explanation, so she must be feeling insecure.

So he considerately calls after her. "Hey, wait."

Zhu Hong stops mid-stride.

Zhao Yunlan says, "You see, I can't say anything, out of respect for him. But I assure you there's nothing to worry about. Just treat him like you treat me."

Zhu Hong doesn't say anything after hearing that, and just starts walking away again. She really wants to slap Zhao Yunlan across the face.

## Chapter 54

Eventually, the sky darkens.

Having finished his task, Chu Shuzhi is standing on the rooftop with his hands in his pockets. The north wind howls, whipping his hair around. Guo Changcheng expects him to be blown away by the wind at any moment; Chu Shuzhi really is too skinny, so much so that he appears malnourished.

Guo Changcheng doesn't dare to move; beneath his feet is a rooftop covered with cinnabar powder.

Chu Shuzhi used the rooftop like a big piece of yellow paper, drawing a gigantic "talisman" on it with cinnabar powder. Then, he used black stones to mark eight positions. Guo Changcheng, standing at the centre of the "talisman", instantly feels a change of atmosphere. The night breeze carries some kind of special odour; he can't describe it well.

The smell is sticky, humid, not exactly putrid, but mixed with the scents of mud and blood, and a touch of elusive bitterness.

Guo Changcheng sniffs and wrinkles his nose, puzzled. "Chu-ge?"

"That's the smell of resentment." Chu Shuzhi doesn't turn around. He looks down into the darkness. They've set up an elaborate trap, and in the gloom, the light grey coat Shen Wei is wearing stands out noticeably. He's standing right on the capturer's spot. Chu Shuzhi shakes his head. "Who is Chief Zhao involved with this time? Shen Wei... I've never heard of such a figure before."

This instant, Shen Wei looks up, but it's too dark so Chu Shuzhi can't make out his expression. The next moment, he vanishes from where

he stood.

Chu Shuzhi's face tenses up. "It's coming."

Guo Changcheng says, "Ah?"

"Ah, nothing!" Chu Shuzhi rushes towards him, and as if he were treating psoriasis, sticks a yellow paper talisman onto his face. "Shut your mouth! Don't make a sound."

The special smell grows thicker and thicker. Lin Jing stops taking selfies and puts away his phone. Standing in the northeastern corner, he opens the bottle with a stern face. A filthy cloud of black smoke ascends. Lin Jing looks up; in his hand, he's clasping a golden Vajra seal<sup>64</sup>, and his face is incredibly solemn. And yet, he doesn't kill it as Zhao Yunlan ordered, but begins chanting transcendence scripture.

This used to be a living soul, born within the Heavens and the Earth, and from the essence of Nature. Perhaps it's a new soul, or perhaps it's one that has reincarnated countless times. Lin Jing cannot bring himself to execute it so violently, unlike Zhao Yunlan.

And yet the bellowing chant has as much effect on it as music does on an oblivious ox. The ghost won't be appeased, and the repetitive babbling only causes it to grow larger, hovering in the air and spreading out like a colossal monster. It roars towards the sky, and the moonlit night is quickly shrouded in darkness.

The next moment, three gunshots pierce the silence of the night. The small fragment of resentment shatters into pieces and dissipates into the air.

A window on the sixth floor has been pushed open. Lin Jing can see a flickering light, and he can almost imagine Zhao Yunlan's expression as he looks down, frowning and mumbling discontentedly, "Stupid monk chanting scripture."



Not everything in this world is capable of transcendence. If that were the case, the Guardian Order and the SIU wouldn't have to exist.

Here he was, trying to help him cross the river<sup>65</sup>, but he wouldn't even budge a step.

A screeching howl comes from afar. Lin Jing holds his palms together, bellows a mantra, and somersaults onto a branch of a withered and leafless tree. An enormous sphere of black smoke crashes like a bomb on to where he stood just a moment ago; the bricks on the ground are instantly shattered, and the air fills with a shower of pebbles. A humongous figure arrives with a whirling gust, around four, five metres tall. It only has an upper body, and all that's left of the legs are bones; black blood drips as it walks, and every droplet sizzles on the ground, melting rocks along the way.

"You're not letting anyone stand in your way at all, so it seems," Lin Jing laughs bitterly, but his legs aren't hesitant. Like a giant spider, he leaps onto a second floor window and with bare hands ascends the hospital building, climbing up the windows and cracks in the wall; he moves even faster than an elevator. The black shadow pursues him.

When Lin Jing has reached the sixth floor, he shouts towards the black cat by the window, "Catch!"

Da Qing pounces out like a black meatball, and the six bells hung in six corners ring together. With the sound of a woman's shout, a giant serpent slithers out from a corner, forked tongue rolling, and part of the cloud of black smoke is slowly being sucked into her mouth.

The rest of the black shadow tailing Lin Jing thrashes about. The ringing grows more and more intense, and clouds of black smoke are being sucked into the mouth of the giant serpent, making the shadowy figure shrink.

Then suddenly, from within the shadow floating in the air, the face of a man emerges and becomes clearly visible. It's the man Guo Changcheng saw: white-haired, red-eyed.

Zhao Yunlan puts out his cigarette on the window sill. "Zhu Hong, dodge!"

At the same time, the six bells stop swinging, all muted simultaneously.

The black cat pounces on the serpent, and as they fall to the ground, the serpent transforms into a woman again. All the windows on the sixth floor shatter, and the half-bodied man swells up a few sizes.

Zhao Yunlan bends down and helps Zhu Hong get up. He then stands by the window, just a few metres away from the ghost floating in mid-air.

"Guardian Order," he says, like it's only standard police business. "So you died and didn't enter reincarnation properly. It's almost New Year, and you decided to start poisoning people?"

The mention of 'New Year' seems to aggravate the ghost. He extends his enormous hand and tries to seize Zhao Yunlan's neck in a swirling mass of black smoke.

The Guardian Order Token morphs into a whip and grows like a living vine, sliding out of Zhao Yunlan's sleeve and wrapping around the giant hand. Man and ghost are in a deadlock, surrounded by a sea of broken glass.

Zhu Hong pushes Lin Jing hard. "Are you blind, go help!"

Lin Jing was just chased by the ghost and played Spider-Man for a while, his fingers are still hurting, and he has yet to catch his breath. He wears a bitter face. "Help? Help with what? Do you see how big this thing is, what do you think I can do?"

"Chime your bell! Aren't monks supposed to chime bells every day!?"

She shouts into Lin Jing's ear until it begins to buzz. He says helplessly, "Good madam, please calm yourself down. I'm a Shaolin disciple, we don't chime bells all day! Besides, may Buddha have mercy, mercy on dark and evil souls. This one used to be a human, the bell wouldn't have much effect anyway; and you couldn't even swallow the ghost, you think my measly bell will work?"

"I don't care, think of something!"

Lin Jing looks towards Zhao Yunlan and sighs miserably. "May Buddha have mercy... mercy on my face... may he make me more handsome."

Then, he takes out a small pot, about the size of a hand; he opens the lid, and the smell of lamp oil wafts out. Lin Jing reluctantly peers inside. He's about to put his hand in, when Zhao Yunlan waves towards him without turning his head. "Save your lamp oil, I don't need your help."

The next second, the ghost wriggles out of the Guardian's whip, which swirls into the air and retracts into his sleeve. The ghost roars and rips out the window frame; a massive cloud of black smoke squeezes in from outside, almost bursting open the wall.

At the same time, Zhao Yunlan takes a step back, both hands held out in front of him, fingers splayed. There's a dagger in his right hand, and without a word, he slashes open his left palm. Bright red blood flows into the fuller of the blade, then stops moving as if solidified.

A smile emerges on his face.

Da Qing sees what's happening, his fur bristling, and he can't help pouncing as far away from him as possible and into Zhu Hong's

arms. That smile doesn't look like Zhao Yunlan in the slightest. In that moment, his eyes are incredibly hollow, his gaze is menacing, the silhouette of his nose casts a shadow across half his face, and his mouth curves up into a chilling diabolical smile.

For a moment, none can tell which of the two is the actual ghost.

"Nether Realms, heed my call." The voice doesn't seem to be Zhao Yunlan's either; deep and inexplicably hoarse, it cuts one's ears like a blunt saw. "Blood as oath, cold iron as proof, lend your three thousand soldiers of darkness. Men and gods, none shall survive..."

The last few words are uttered slowly, one after another; powerful and scary beyond words. The blood on the blade turns black, and countless hollow suits of armour burst through the white wall behind him, riding on skeleton war horses, wielding corroded blades, charging forward with the force of landslides and tsunamis. The ghost is forced outside and its hand is quickly slashed off.

Zhao Yunlan stumbles backwards, as if exhausted. He falls against the wall and slides to the ground amidst the horrified gazes of the others. He lowers his hand, from which blood keeps on flowing, and says, puffing and panting, "Fuck, it's all over my sleeve, the dry cleaner's gonna have a hard time with this."

Da Qing walks forward, approaching him slowly, testing the waters. He stops around half a metre away and asks hesitantly, "Yunlan?"

Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrows. "Hmmm?"

The black cat is familiar with this look... he's familiar with all looks that make him want to extend his claws, and so he doesn't hesitate to slap him across the face, roaring, "What the hell was that just now!? I never taught you this kind of dark magic!"

"Humans can read, stupid cat," Zhao Yunlan says boastfully.

Da Qing almost slaps him again. Climbing onto his body, he stands on Zhao Yunlan's legs, front paws on his upper arms. "What book did you take from the library!?"

Zhao Yunlan pats him on the head with his uninjured hand. "The Book of Souls. Don't worry, I was just trying to clarify something, and accidentally came across this. Just now I happened to think of it. I'm not plotting anything, do you not believe in my integrity?"

The black cat roars, "Do you have integrity at all!?"

Zhao Yunlan gets his entire face splattered with cat saliva.

Eventually, the black cat jumps down from Zhao Yunlan's shoulder, barely accepting his explanation. He can somewhat trust Zhao Yunlan's judgement, but he still grumbles, "If you want your ugly ID card picture to be posted on the Underworld's wanted list and passed around for everyone to see, then I have nothing to say."

Hearing that, Zhao Yunlan pushes him to the ground and scolds him. "The picture on my ID card is handsome, cool, extraordinarily good-looking and captivating; you're just jealous, you pancake-faced fat pig of a cat."

Chu Shuzhi calls Zhao Yunlan's phone from the rooftop, overflowing with excitement. "Was that Shadow Blitz? Who the hell did that? Wasn't it totally insane? Wasn't it fucking awesome?"

Zhu Hong can't help it; she snatches the phone and hangs up.

Lin Jing feels compelled to ask, "Shadow Blitz? Catalysed with blood?"

"Blood and iron serve as channels." Catching his breath, Zhao Yunlan gets up off the floor, brushes some dirt off his pants, and heads outside. "The true catalyst is malice. From malice comes brutality, I guess this counts as fighting evil with evil."

Zhu Hong hesitates; as she follows him out, she asks, "You have malicious thoughts?"

"Of course, am I not human?" Zhao Yunlan smiles, and candidly admits, "I have a lot of them—actually, I think that Shadow Blitz shouldn't be classified as dark magic, I think it's quite nice: spiritual yoga, detox; you come out of it refreshed and relaxed."

Zhu Hong has nothing to say to that.

Da Qing jumps onto Zhao Yunlan's shoulder and swats at his nose.

"Ouch! You fat fuck!"

The ghost has by then been surrounded by the Shadow Troops. It realises that this is a losing battle, and decides to run for it.

Chu Shuzhi's two layers of 'net' are instantly triggered. They hadn't expected the evil ghost to be so powerful. If Shen Wei hadn't been in the Guarding Eye position while the ghost was almost defeated by Zhao Yunlan, it might still have escaped.

Lightning that has been building up in the sky now comes crashing down. The ghost is being held in place by something invisible, and the Shadow Troops on its tail vanish suddenly. It struggles frantically, and the entire area around the hospital is quivering; those outside of the protected zone must think it's an earthquake.

Chu Shuzhi shouts from the rooftop, "The bug is on the web! Spider, don't let the prey escape!"

Shen Wei, after staying away the whole time, suddenly appears out of thin air behind the ghost. He claws at the air, the ghost's neck is seized by an invisible hand, and the black smoke shrouding its body disperses until a legless man remains, glaring at Shen Wei with contempt.

Shen Wei is unmoved. He tightens his fingers, and like a piece of paper, the ghost is squeezed into a ball. With a flash, it evaporates in Shen Wei's grasp.

## Chapter 55

The prey is caught. Zhu Hong's zone automatically unlocks, and all the shards of shattered glass fly up into the window frames and reassemble themselves. Nurses come and go, checking on the patients and the few people who have arrived at night for emergencies. Some patients who had woken up and gone outside to see if there were any abnormalities now return to their rooms one by one.

All the street vendors have packed up and left. From time to time, taxis pass by quickly, not intending to pick up passengers.

Shen Wei rushes up the building and bumps into Chu Shuzhi coming downstairs. Chu Shuzhi is the conceited type, he's fine with people he knows, but to strangers, he almost never says anything. But now when he sees Shen Wei, he extends a hand and praises him. "That was a beautiful catch."

Shen Wei quickly nods in acknowledgement, but his complexion is even worse than that of the patient with acute appendicitis who's just then being wheeled past them on a gurney.

He takes out a small medicine bottle and just says, "It's in here, take care of it."

Then he tosses the bottle to Chu Shuzhi and grabs Zhao Yunlan by the hand. "You come with me, we need to talk."

Zhao Yunlan lets himself be pulled away without resisting.

Shen Wei pushes him into the men's room, locks the door, and glares at him in the dim light; he lowers his voice. "Just now, was that Shadow Blitz?"



"Yeah."

"You did that?"

Zhao Yunlan nods. "Uh, yes."

Upon hearing this, Shen Wei says no more and lifts his hand to slap Zhao Yunlan.

But even though he put tremendous force behind it, he still cannot bring himself to hit Zhao Yunlan, and his hand stops right next to Zhao Yunlan's ear.

Zhao Yunlan is stunned, and asks, bewildered, "Shen Wei?"

"Don't talk to me!" Shen Wei's face goes pale with fury, and his hand trembles in mid-air. After a long while, he grits his teeth. "'Men and gods, none shall survive!' The Guardian is certainly formidable and fearless. Are you... are you not afraid the Heavens will punish you!?"

Zhao Yunlan rarely sees Shen Wei get angry, not to mention this angry. It hurts him seeing Shen Wei so infuriated, and he grabs hold of his cold hand, "Yes, yes, it's my fault, if you want to hit me then hit me. Don't be mad. Don't be mad."

Shen Wei flicks his hands away. "I'm not kidding! Do you know gathering the Shadow Troops is absolutely forbidden dark magic? Do you understand what dark magic is? Can the three worlds tolerate this? You have no regard for the laws of nature, do you? How big of a mess do you need to make before you learn!? You... you..."

His voice stops abruptly. After a long time, he asks with a quivering voice, "What will I do if that happens?"

Zhao Yunlan wraps his arms around him, and softly kisses his hair. "It's my fault, baby, I'm sorry."

He thinks his attitude is really good, but this phrase gets on the wrong side of Shen Wei, who pushes him away, pressing him against a stall door with one hand, and fists the other in his collar. "Don't use the tricks you've used on countless others to fool me."

Zhao Yunlan smiles helplessly. "Then what do you want me to do?"

The fury on Shen Wei's face gradually wears away in the face of Zhao Yunlan's smile. After a moment, it softens a little more... when it comes to that jerk, Shen Wei is unable to scold him too severely, not even if he punctured a hole into the sky.

After quite some time, Shen Wei sighs, lets go, and says blandly, "Can't you just control yourself a little more?"

Zhao Yunlan is all apologetic, and hastily nods. Even though he doesn't think he has a problem at all, if Shen Wei says there is one, he'll apologise no matter what.

Shen Wei looks down and takes his injured hand; he asks softly, "Does it hurt?"

Zhao Yunlan shakes his head.

"I... just now I was a little short-tempered..."

"You hurt my back," Zhao Yunlan says, expressionless, "and you shouted at me. You're always polite to other people, but you shouted at me."

The look on his face scares Shen Wei, who doesn't realise he's just flirting. Shen Wei hesitates, and helplessly holds up Zhao Yunlan's face with both hands, "I..."

Zhao Yunlan keeps looking at him with that blank expression.

"I didn't mean to..."

Shen Wei stops talking, starting to panic.

Zhao Yunlan points towards his own lips. "Take care of me well and I'll forgive you."

Shen Wei is stupefied for a second before realising what he said. His face goes blank. "Such indecency!"

Then his ears flush red and he turns to leave.

And yet as he walks to the door, he looks back and finds Zhao Yunlan still leaning against the wall in the same pose, looking at him with a half-smile.

Shen Wei's hand is already on the door handle, but he hesitates there for a long time. Then, he rushes back in big steps, holds onto Zhao Yunlan's waist and kisses him.

He already has him wrapped around his finger, what'll he do in the future?

~~~

Zhao Yunlan's lips are a little swollen. When Zhu Hong sees them, she looks away, furious, and thinks: this queer man whore, is he really that horny?

The gang head back to No.4 Bright Avenue. Chu Shuzhi sets up another 'net' around the interrogation room and sticks yellow paper talismans everywhere like prayer flags. And then he locks the door, opens the bottle, and lets the ghost out.

Zhao Yunlan offers Shen Wei a chair before leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. He lights a cigarette and without looking up says lazily, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can

and will be used against you in court. Think before you say anything."

The legless ghost is bound to a chair by three fettering talismans. Raising his head eerily, he asks with a hoarse voice, "Used in court? What court?"

"The Underworld Court, fair and impartial, to judge all the crimes of your life. No more babbling, just answer our questions!" Lin Jing isn't in a good mood, having been chased by him like a giant gecko. This is the place where he turns the most schizophrenic: outside, he's a cunning monk putting on an honest and upright pretence, but once he's in the interrogation room, he transforms into roaring Lin Jing, shouting to assert his dominance.

The ghost laughs scornfully.

Chu Shuzhi glances towards Guo Changcheng, who instantly sits upright and clears his throat. Peeking at the 'cheats' scribbled all over his palm, he recites, "Na- name, age, time of death, cause of death."

The ghost looks at Guo Changcheng, making him shiver.

Chu Shuzhi puts a hand on Guo Changcheng's shoulder, and at the same time, Lin Jing slams his hands onto the table, shouting angrily, "The hell you lookin' at, speak!"

"Wang Xiangyang, 62, died last year, December 29 of the lunar calendar, car accident."

Guo Changcheng carefully looks at Chu Shuzhi, who nods, signalling him to continue. And so Guo Changcheng looks at his palm cheatsheet again. Chu Shuzhi can't help but peek as well; written on his palm is: '2. Oh, XXX (insert their name), if your cause of death was XXX (insert their cause of death), then why did you hurt innocent people?'

Then he hears Guo Changcheng stuttering, "Oh, Wang Xiangyang, if your cause of death was 'December 29'... no, your cause of death was 'car accident', then why did you hurt innocent people?"

Chu Shuzhi really doesn't want to laugh on this sombre occasion, so he turns around to Zhao Yunlan. "Chief Zhao, give me a cigarette."

This way he can hide his inappropriate expression.

"Innocent?" Wang Xiangyang's face shows a greatly distorted smile; like a lunatic, he leans forward. "Who's innocent? Tell me, kiddo, who's innocent? Are they innocent? Are you innocent?"

Oh no, why is he replying with a question? Guo Changcheng hasn't prepared a response for that. He's confused and doesn't know what to do.

Chu Shuzhi looks down, and Lin Jing looks away; his two backups both tacitly abandon him.

But Shen Wei suddenly asks, "Can you tell me how you died in a car accident?"

Wang Xiangyang turns towards him with a bland face, in silence.

Shen Wei asks again, "Was it related to the people you cursed? Was it related to the oranges you were selling?"

"I used to sell oranges for a living," Wang Xiangyang answers him after a long pause, "I lived in a village on the outskirts of Dragon City. Every day, I would push my small cart full of fruits into the city, and sell them on the streets; my entire family lived off of this source of income. My wife had uremia, she couldn't work. My son, he was almost thirty, couldn't get a wife, and since we were poor farmers, I couldn't afford a house for him in the city."

"If you have to ask, then I'll tell you... I really liked the few days before and after the New Year best. It's the time when most street vendors are already back home, and the supermarkets are the most crowded. Some people would buy from me out of convenience; and I would make the most money around that time." Wang Xiangyang calms down under Shen Wei's gaze, but he wears a scornful smile nonetheless. "December 29, what a great day."

Guo Changcheng finally finds something useful on his palm, and seizes the chance to ask, "Do you despise society because of family problems?"

"Despise society?" Wang Xiangyang repeats, and shakes his head, "I don't. I know all those who wronged me, and I just had to get to them. I would've left once I was done with all of them. If you want to grill me, then do it; if you want to throw me down into the Eighteen Levels of Hell, then do it. But I had to make sure those people would go down with me, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth⁶⁶."

He says all that calmly, but to the others' ears, it comes across as vile and vicious.

Right at that moment, Wang Zheng knocks on the door and enters with a tray full of fruit, along with her eternal follower Sang Zan.

Wang Zheng hands the fruit to Zhao Yunlan and looks at Shen Wei with a strange expression. But she doesn't say anything, and only reminds Chu Shuzhi, "The talismans outside, once you're done using them, take them down, don't give the janitor a hard time."

After the two ghostly assistants have left, Shen Wei continues, "Who are they?"

"Those three in the hospital, and many more... uh, but it really wasn't the driver's fault." Wang Xiangyang says as though he were an outsider. "It's allowed to light firecrackers on December 29. That day,

two teenagers were fooling around like buffoons, though they were dressed like humans, and most decently too... down jackets that must have cost a few thousand apiece. They went crazy and threw firecrackers everywhere, and their parents wouldn't interfere. They threw some under my cart, and I scolded them; I shouldn't have, but I couldn't help it, my brain was probably malfunctioning in the cold. Those kids got even crazier, and started throwing firecrackers at me. I chased after them, and one kid ran behind me and flipped my cart over. Oranges, apples, all my fruit rolled onto the street."

He stops here, and looks down at the neatly arranged fruit platter. He can't help but lick his lips. He could never bring himself to eat his own fruit when he was alive, and now he cannot eat any even if he wanted to.

Bizarre lights sparkle in his eyes. "That cartful of fruit was our family's New Year money. I was desperate. I ran out to pick up the fruit, but I couldn't get all of it back. It was daytime, and there were many passers-by. I said, 'Please help me, will you please help me,' but someone picked up one of my oranges, didn't even look at me, and started eating it. He even said, 'They're all dirty now, nobody will buy them, whatcha doin' that for?' And then he picked up an apple and left."

Wang Xiangyang pauses and his face surprisingly wears a serene and relieved smile, as though his words have pleased him greatly. "Many were like him, so many... they saw the fruit, and they took some and left; some people even brought bags. I said 'You can't do that, you have to pay, you can't just take my fruit like that.' Once they heard that, they took my fruit and ran off. I went after them, and that's when a taxi ran me over and killed me on the spot."

"It was snowing a lot that day. The car couldn't stop; the driver hit the brakes, but the car glided a few metres forward, grinding over me. My upper body was pushed along by the wheels, and my legs were

cut off and left where I fell. Before my last breath, an orange bumped into my face. You tell me, didn't I die of injustice?"

Nobody speaks.

Wang Xiangyang continues, "Shouldn't I take revenge? Should you have arrested me? When I go to the Underworld, how should the Underworld Kings judge this case?"

No wonder the Lines of Karma on the victims were all so light... The person who actually caused his death was the driver, and yet the driver wasn't related to any of this.

Wang Xiangyang leans back in his chair, an action that looks particularly terrifying when a legless man does it. He laughs with a deep voice. "When I was alive, I didn't know there were people like you whose jobs were to look after these kinds of things. If you want to uphold justice, then why arrest me and not them? Forget it, I'm done with this world."

Guo Changcheng sees the final reminder on his palm, which says 'family / friends', and so he says without thinking, "Haven't you thought about your son and your grandchildren? What about your ill wife? Don't you want to do good deeds for their sake?"

Wang Xiangyang says with a bland face, "My son didn't get married, I don't have grandchildren. Besides, my wife and son are both dead. Our bloodline ends here, who the fuck should I do good deeds for?"

Guo Changcheng hears himself ask, shakily, "How did they..."

"I did it. I extinguished the flame on the stove we used as a heater. It was nighttime, and they were both still sleeping. They were poisoned by the gas leak." And Wang Xiangyang adds, "No pain."

Guo Changcheng says, "How... how could you do that?"

Wang Xiangyang gives him a frank look and the hint of a smile. "I think being alive is more painful than being dead, what do you think?"

Chapter 56

Now Lin Jing understands why Wang Xiangyang's ghost wouldn't ascend to Heaven... he never did any bad deeds in his life, and yet he struggled to earn a living, and despite all his hard labour, eventually died an absurd and tragic death.

When hatred mounts to the extreme, no more delicate emotions will remain in a man's heart. And so he cut off all his connections with the living, and from then on, nothing could ever arouse nostalgia or joy in him anymore.

Perhaps if he'd lived, after a few years, time would've healed and washed away his anger, and let him peacefully cross this obstacle. But he's dead.

As his life has ended, there's nothing more he can gain, and there's nothing more he can lose. His soul is forever trapped under the wheels that took his life, and he has since descended into evil.

Zhao Yunlan frowns. This is a difficult situation... picking up a few pieces of fruit from the street, how can that be a crime punishable by death? A wallet thief will at most be sent to prison, not executed by firing squad; this kind of crime is hardly deserving of the death penalty, is it?

And yet because of the greed of those people, an honest man who was looking forward to returning home for the New Year died an unjust death. Should he not be enraged? Should he not take revenge? After something like this, who would just laugh it off and enter reincarnation willingly?

All of this seems logical.

And so our resourceful Chief Zhao quickly comes up with a wonderful idea: he decides to send Wang Xiangyang to the Underworld, and as always, he can bring his case to the Underworld Court, and if the Ten Kings of the Underworld unanimously agree that he ought to be entitled to vengeance, then he'll be given a permit, which will allow him to do whatever he wants on earth. Then, this matter will no longer be related to the Guardian Order, and if anything goes wrong, the blame will naturally fall on the other side.

But just when he's about to put forth his perfect solution, Shen Wei interrupts.

He says calmly, "Appropriating without permission is theft, whether with gold and silver, or just a few pieces of fruit, the nature is the same. Not to mention someone was killed because of it. I think that's tantamount to 'murder for property', so you should get your revenge."

The words have been spoken, and there's no way for Zhao Yunlan to stop them anymore. The usually eloquent Chief Zhao's throat closes up until he feels like he must die.

As soon as Shen Wei has finished speaking, Wang Xiangyang finds that the force restricting him has disappeared.

The others may not know, but Zhao Yunlan is well aware that although he appears as Shen Wei, he really is still the Ghost Slayer; ever since the dawn of time, the Ghost Slayer has been judging Good and Evil under his blade, long before the Underworld Court.

That is to say, the Ghost Slayer's authority is supreme; even the Underworld Court cannot change his verdict. Now that Shen Wei has made such an authoritative statement in the interrogation room, that is effectively giving Wang Xiangyang the 'permit'.

"But there is never an end to vendetta. If you let them go, perhaps karma will get to them a few years later... or if they die before that, it will eventually get to them in one of their next incarnations. But you

are only a human soul. Because you're filled with such an immense amount of resentment, you descended into evil, and you even committed the heinous crime of killing your own wife and child; after you have your revenge, you will probably be locked up in the Eighteen Levels of Hell. It is a double-edged sword⁶⁷. Do you still not have any objection?"

Besides Zhao Yunlan, who knows the truth, Wang Xiangyang knows better than the others in this room that Shen Wei is special. He looks at Shen Wei in scrutiny, and with a succinct headshake, says, "No."

Shen Wei turns around and pretends to ask Zhao Yunlan. "How do you want to handle this?"

You've already handled it on your own, what the hell are you asking me for... Zhao Yunlan stares at him and coughs. He still has to help him cover up. And so he takes out a Guardian Order talisman, slams it on the table, and pushes it towards Wang Xiangyang. "Wait here. An Underworld messenger will come get you before dawn. Show this to him, and he'll take you to the Kings of the Underworld for a permit."

Wang Xiangyang's lips quiver. After a while, he leans forward, and holds up the Guardian Order talisman with both hands.

"Final reminder," Zhao Yunlan says routinely. "Like he said, once you've got the permit, you can get your revenge, but afterwards your punishment will be sized up, think before you act."

Wang Xiangyang stares at the Guardian Order talisman in his hands intently, and shakes his head. "No need to remind me, I've killed more than a dozen, I'm already in deep water."

Then he smiles bitterly. "I never thought there would still be a place of reason after death. Thank you."

Everyone in the room is shocked. Zhu Hong immediately asks, "Hold on, you said you already killed more than a dozen? Using the same method? And they're all dead?"

"Of course they are, and they died untimely and dreadful deaths too, the kind that prevents them from entering reincarnation for eternity."

Zhu Hong looks at Zhao Yunlan with astonishment... since the city is densely populated, busy and loud, it's normal that they can't always realise when an evil ghost has killed a few people. But when the numbers rise, not only the Guardian Order, but also the city's sufficiently cultivated urban tribes should be able to feel the black aura that reaches up to the skies.

And yet, if Wang Xiangyang hadn't mentioned it, none of them would've realised he has already killed more than a dozen people... including Shen Wei!

Shen Wei instantly thinks of the Ink Brush of Virtue. "Did you in any way... change the Mark of Virtue on yourself?"

"I did," Wang Xiangyang says candidly. "I had just poisoned my wife and son and was about to go after my first target. Then someone made a deal with me."

"What kind of deal?"

"He said if I went on a killing spree so overtly and fearlessly, it would quickly alert law enforcement on Earth. He sold me a talisman and told me to wear it around my neck, so you wouldn't sense my presence. And in return, he would take away the souls of the people I killed." Wang Xiangyang says frankly, "I thought, since I have no use for the souls anyway, and I'm already a dead man, I don't have anything to lose. So I went with it. And it turns out he really upheld his end of the bargain. No-one stopped me... most of those people thought they caught some strange, incurable disease and died in

hospital. Who would've thought that someone would eventually call the police for food poisoning?"

Zhao Yunlan follows up, "Did you see what was written or drawn on the talisman?"

"I did," Wang Xiangyang says. "There's my name and full date of birth⁶⁸; first written in black, and then the words are circled in red, with cinnabar powder."

He says this while holding up a small paper talisman folded into an octagon from his neck. "This is it, you can take a look if you want."

Chu Shuzhi takes it and unfolds it, and sees a line of words circled in red. But he has yet to take a closer look, and the paper talisman combusts into a small pile of ash.

In just a glimpse, it's difficult for Shen Wei to make out who the handwriting belongs to. But from Wang Xiangyang's description, it's almost certainly the Ink Brush of Virtue: black for evil and red for good, one on the left and one on the right, whether you're a boon or a bane, a villain or a hero, it doesn't matter; the moving brush writes, and once written, all will be forgiven.

Legend says that the shaft of the Ink Brush of Virtue comes from the root of a tree that grows in the Underworld. The wood is indestructible, unbreakable by blades. And yet the tree is leafless, flowerless and fruitless, and for unknown reasons, people call it the 'Ancient Tree of Virtue'. The name came from ancient times, and the reason for its naming is now lost.

But Shen Wei thinks, perhaps the naming of this 'not yet lived but dead' tree ridicules the very concept of virtue and karma in the three worlds: through doing good to gain virtue and eschewing evil for fear of karma, virtue is born. Contrary to that, the heart is dead, and pure good is dead.

Zhao Yunlan asks, "What did the person look like, and where did you see them?"

Wang Xiangyang hesitates, then replies, "Hm... quite normal I guess. It's strange, I can't think of it now that you mention it, it was...."

He pauses and rubs between his eyebrows; he seems to find it weird himself. "Exactly where it was, I can't really remember. But it was probably near my home, in Plum Village, twenty miles west of the city. You can take a look there."

Shen Wei stands up and nods. "Thank you."

Wang Xiangyang says calmly, "I should thank you instead. I haven't lied about killing people, and I won't lie about anything else. There's really nothing I can't tell you, so you can just ask me if you have questions."

Shen Wei gives Zhao Yunlan a knowing glance, and leaves the interrogation room.

Zhao Yunlan pats Lin Jing on the shoulder and says with a low voice, "Call an Underworld messenger, explain the whole thing, and the other side will know how to take care of this."

Then he follows Shen Wei out.

Shen Wei is waiting for him at the end of the corridor. Zhao Yunlan takes him to his office, locks the door, and asks, "So? Do you think it's *the* Ink Brush of Virtue?"

Shen Wei frowns. "I'm not entirely certain, but it's very probable. Even if it were a fake, whoever made it knows the Four Artefacts inside and out."

"Hmmm." Zhao Yunlan rubs his own chin.

"What?" Shen Wei asks.

Before Zhao Yunlan can say anything, suddenly, the silhouette of a skeleton puppet is cast onto the window of Zhao Yunlan's office. He opens the window and lets it in.

The puppet lowers its skull and bows eerily towards Zhao Yunlan. Then it walks over to Shen Wei, transforms into a letter, and floats into Shen Wei's hand.

Standing beside the window, Zhao Yunlan squints out into the hazy night. He can't help but feel like a pair of eyes is watching his every move.

After a while, he closes the curtains and laughs scornfully. But then he turns back around to look at the annoying know-it-all who keeps putting himself into impossible situations, whether there's a good reason for it or not.

As Shen Wei finishes reading the letter; he frowns.

Zhao Yunlan asks, "You've got something to do?"

"It is urgent, I have to go." Shen Wei swiftly transforms from a gentle and polite professor into the Ghost Slayer, surrounded by cold air and wrapped in a black cloak. He rushes towards the window, reminding Zhao Yunlan, "You will not go to Plum Village on your own, no matter what. Wait for me to return."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't answer.

Shen Wei turns around to look at him. Zhao Yunlan is slouching against the wall, and half-genuinely complains, "Jeez, it wasn't easy getting Your Honour to open up, you know, and here I thought I would get some tonight. I'm horny, and I get insomnia when I sleep alone." He sighs exaggeratedly. "I'm gonna go to work looking like a panda tomorrow."

Shen Wei realises he can't talk about serious matters with this one, and so he silently passes through the window, turns into a cloud of black smoke, and vanishes without a trace.

Zhao Yunlan comes to stand beside the window and takes out a cigarette. Without moving, he smokes it in silence. When he's satisfied that Shen Wei is long gone, he opens a drawer in his desk, fully loads the gun he keeps concealed in his ankle holster, and makes sure the dagger he wears on his person is well fastened. Then, he takes out his talisman wallet. He leaves half of them on the table, only bringing with him those for attack and defence.

"Why wouldn't I go?" Zhao Yunlan snickers. "I wouldn't want to let down whoever lured you away intentionally."

Then, Zhao Yunlan puts on a jacket, shoulders his bag, and, like always, says goodbye to his colleagues as he walks out steadily. He turns on GPS in his car and heads for Plum Village.

The roads are clear at night. About two hours later, Zhao Yunlan arrives at Plum Village. It's like any other village on the outskirts of Dragon City: it's very tranquil, all that can be heard is the occasional dog barking.

He drives around the village, and finally, at the western corner, he finds several conjoined pagoda trees.

Zhao Yunlan stops his car, walks around the gigantic trees, and finds something...

Years ago, when the shifter tribes ran rampant, they used a common trick: they would plant pagoda trees in the shape of the constellation Big Dipper, gathering shadow in the 'bowl', and the 'handle' extending to the west, representing the connection of Yin and Yang, the realms of the dead and the living. When enough dark energy is collected, a doorway appears.

And it just so happens that the mountain above these trees is laden with barren tombs.

A deserted and frozen hillside, a land full of mounds.

Chapter 57

Wang Zheng's complaint echoes through the corridor. "Chu Shuzhi, I told you, if you aren't gonna use these talismans, take them off, what is the janitor supposed to do when she comes tomorrow?"

Chu Shuzhi frowns with great contempt and suffering. Guo Changcheng knows what that look means, and with the alertness of a newcomer diligently runs ahead and starts cleaning.

Without a word, Da Qing passes them and heads straight into the 'wall' of the criminal investigations office.

What a wondrous sight it is behind the wall: rows of bookshelves made of hardwood, reaching almost up to the ceiling, accessible with rickety ladders. There's barely enough space for one cat to pass through between the shelves and the ceiling. Inlaid in the wall is a big Sea Dragon Pearl, brightening the entire room like it's daytime without hurting the ghosts who cannot withstand sunlight.

The bookshelves emanate the smell of antique books; it's the aroma of long-sedimented ink, mixed with the subtle scent of mould from between pages that have not seen the sun in too long. The resulting mixture is the ripe and musty aroma of books.

Sang Zan is working on organising the books. Most of them are written in either traditional or simplified Chinese, and he doesn't recognise any of the words, so he has to do a lot of symbol-matching between the spines of the books and the markings on the shelves. He's very slow, but he checks everything thoroughly, and he has never made a mistake.

After Zhao Yunlan freed him from the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, he opened the restricted library to him and left him in charge of this

job. His salary is the same as Guo Changcheng's—the regular pay for all junior staff members—but the benefits are pretty good. Except that Guo Changcheng is getting bright red banknotes, whereas Sang Zan gets a lot of paper money and high-quality incense for the dead.

This is the first dignifying job he ever held in his life: no longer a slave ordered around like an animal, no longer a leader admired by foolish people he simply wanted to destroy... though this job comes a bit too late, now that he's already been dead for a few hundred years, he still treasures it a lot.

Living a peaceful and unfettered life with the person he loves: it's the kind of life he never could have gotten in his lifetime, no matter how big he dared to dream.

As he sees Da Qing walk in, he greets him with seriousness, "Hellu, cat."

Da Qing replies, "Hellu, stutterer."

Sang Zan is confused... Wang Zheng is a polite and quiet girl, so naturally she wouldn't have taught him to insult people. He doesn't understand, and asks properly, "Studd... studdera, is... is what?"

Da Qing treads atop the wooden shelves, preoccupied, and says carelessly, "Studdera means good brother."

Sang Zan nods in understanding and says passionately, "Oh, hellu, cat studdera!"

Da Qing can't say anything to that.

Sang Zan continues, "Cat studdera, waat... what do you want to read?"

Da Qing isn't really in the mood to tease him anymore, so he lies down on top of the shelf above him and asks, "Zhao Yunlan... Chief

Zhao took a book from here the other day; did he put it back? Let me see it."

Like doing a listening exam, Sang Zan listens to the 'recording' devotedly and asks Da Qing to patiently repeat it three times, after which he finally understands most of it. He wears a big smile of accomplishment, and takes a book that has yet to make it onto the shelves from a small cart, "Eats— it's this wan."

The book cover is ruined, and a corner of it is stained with coffee. There's no need to mention which clumsy person did that. The title, *Book of Souls*, looks ominous, and a part of it is torn off, making it look particularly dilapidated.

Da Qing leaps down from the top of the shelf and lands on Sang Zan's small cart. He paws through the pages, but they're all blank; there's nothing written on them.

His heart sinks; he has yet to reach the level of cultivation to read this book.

For some reason, his power has shrunk down to less than ten per cent compared to when it was at its peak. He can't even transform anymore. Nevertheless, he's still a few-thousand-year-old cat shifter; he couldn't have been surpassed by a mere human who isn't even thirty, could he?

That's utterly impossible.

Unless... that someone's soul is gradually awakening, little by little...

"I've never seen this book before." Da Qing pats the book with his paw, and then can't help spinning in place, chasing his own tail. "Where did it come from?"

If he doesn't know, of course Sang Zan doesn't know, either. The cat and the ghost stare at each other for a while, until the black cat

slowly lowers his head. Depressed, he bounces from the cart onto the floor and walks out; not even in the mood to have milk-dipped cat food, his usual favourite.

He really can't tell whether Zhao Yunlan's 'awakening' is a good thing or a bad thing, he just feels uneasy.

Zhao Yunlan has quite a good life: half the time he's smart and the other half silly. He can stay warm and eat his fill. When he has nothing else to do, he can even let his dirty mind wander; it's a comfortable and pleasant life on the whole.

The black cat is the kind of animal who only wants to sleep in a nice, warm spot all day when it's winter, and only wake up to eat, and then go back to sleep. By his very nature, he cannot comprehend the so-called 'ideals' humans pursue. Now that his owner is ridiculously happy, looking just like a jolly and naive youngster all day, Da Qing is rather pleased, and he really doesn't want any... complications to crop up.

And yet complications have indeed cropped up.

~~~

The biggest complication, Shen Wei, closes his eyes, passing through the Underworld. Even the emotionless spirits and ghosts that have been soaking in the Underworld for eternity inadvertently float away to the sides like duckweed washed away by big waves.

He keeps sinking for an immeasurable amount of time, down into the depths of the Underworld.

The water gets deeper and darker, and it's pitch black at this depth. A black aura seems to be drawn to him, swivelling around him and sucking him in. As he gets further down, there's no water anymore, but only dead darkness. If a human visited this place, their sense of

time and space would be quickly lost, overwhelmed by the feeling of being the only person in the universe.

The road behind and the road ahead, neither can be seen.  
Frighteningly cold, and frighteningly empty.

Here is the land of nothingness: nothing can be seen, nothing can be heard, nothing can be smelled, nothing can be tasted, nothing can be felt.

When a deep roar splits the silence, Shen Wei's blade almost immediately touches someone's neck.

In the sheer darkness, several sets of footsteps are approaching him. Half a dozen demon beasts against one Ghost Slayer: all born in here, grown up in here. They were all born in a lightless place, and they're all equally familiar with darkness. No-one has the upper hand here: it's a fair match of whether the Ghost Slayer's blade is faster, or the demon beasts' fangs are sharper.

Shen Wei cannot shake the thought of Zhao Yunlan. He doesn't want to waste time here: he dodges three times in the dark, and the cautious beasts quickly turn from testing to attacking, pouncing towards him. Shen Wei shouts and the blade in his hand slashes out horizontally, chopping off a row of beast brains with sheer destruction; the cut-off skull segments roll all over the ground.

Shen Wei doesn't linger; without looking at the corpses, he kicks away a brain and walks on.

After a long time, he stops, and from beside him comes a vague sound like a human heartbeat.

The 'troops' summoned by Shadow Blitz aren't soldiers from the Underworld in the usual sense. After all, would the small ghosts working for the Kings of the Underworld answer to such a feral and supercilious command as "Men and gods, none shall survive?"



Indeed, they come from a lightless place even darker and deeper than the Underworld.

The white skeletons in iron armour riding on warhorses are only a result of the limited imagination of the person who did the magic. In fact, these things aren't corporeal, and perhaps... if it weren't for Zhao Yunlan having used blood and iron as catalysts, most people would only have seen them as a horde of demon beasts.

When Zhao Yunlan summoned the Shadow Troops, he even managed to keep them under control. Maybe it was because of his natural talents, or maybe it was simply luck: after all, Shen Wei had been downstairs, so those things hadn't dared cause any trouble.

"The Profane Lands lay imprisoned within the lightless land. When Pangu opened up the skies and split open the earth, the clear and the turbid were distinctly separated. With chaos broken for the first time, the turbid became the land, and every living being followed in turn. Just outside of the realm of Heaven and Earth, another place was established to hide the tainted and accept the dirty."

Afterwards, when Nüwa created humans out of clay, she didn't have the patience to wait for the filth to settle, and so humans were born naturally and intrinsically from sin, and that's where the inherent desire for malice and destruction in human beings originates.

Once the Great Ones were enlightened, they felt great remorse for the creation of the lightless land. They named it the Profane Lands and sealed it away by force. But this primeval godly prison was later broken, a huge opening gaping between its roots. Afterwards, another layer of protective magic was added, and yet this newer spell is about to crumble down as well. The Ghost Face is freed and runs rampant, and more and more demon beasts follow suit.

The opening must not get any bigger.

Shen Wei kneels down on one knee, chanting the sealing spell, temporarily bolstering it. The commotion gradually quiets down, and the opening seems to be covered with an added layer.

With a sombre expression, he leaves. No-one knows how much longer this quiescence can last.

Shen Wei returns to the realm of the living, and the sky is turning bright. He arrives at Zhao Yunlan's small apartment, planning to quietly take off his black cloak without waking Zhao Yunlan. As he turns on the lights, he's shocked: there's no-one in the apartment. The bed he'd made in the morning is still perfectly untouched.

~~~

Having driven all night, Zhao Yunlan tightens his coat in the face of the mountain of tombs, stops the engine, and gets out of the car.

When Shen Wei mentioned the puppet that Guo Changcheng saw in the reflection, Zhao Yunlan realised the hidden truth Shen Wei left untold... that he met Zhao Yunlan as Shen Wei, that hadn't been his intention. He was probably set up.

Zhao Yunlan believes if he hadn't been so persistent, Shen Wei would've avoided him as best he could. If he'd known that Zhao Yunlan was there at the time, no matter what Guo Changcheng saw, even if he'd seen the Ghost Slayer himself, Shen Wei would never have appeared... wiping away Guo Changcheng's memory would've been a piece of cake.

And then Zhao Yunlan thinks of the incident with the sundial; when the Ghost Slayer went to Li Qian's place, he was told on the rooftop: "And so he arranged for him to meet you". Who? What did that mean?

If the master of the demon beast is the Ghost Face, why is he so determined on making the Ghost Slayer meet Zhao Yunlan?

At the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, Zhao Yunlan felt that the Ghost Face had been using something to blackmail the Ghost Slayer, and yet he had no intention of letting Zhao Yunlan in on the truth. In comparison, the black book the Underworld messenger gave him was a much more transparent move.

Zhao Yunlan stands on Earth, among the living, and yet he feels as if there were a gigantic whirlpool beneath him, with thousands of entangled hands grabbing and pulling him; everyone is plotting, everyone's face is shrouded in mist.

Zhao Yunlan lifts up his head and sees a sparkle of ghostly fire in the middle distance. Chilling lights pierce the darkness of the night like menacing eyes, staring at Zhao Yunlan—not far yet not close, either. He stops, and the fire stops as well, as though it were leading the way. Zhao Yunlan follows it, heading steadily towards the graveyard in Plum Village.

Fog engulfs the place, growing thicker and thicker. With a visibility of only one metre, the flickering flame steadily leads the way through the boundless whiteness.

The air is damp and the occasional droplet wets his face; eerily cold.

Ebbing and surging sighs reach his ears, one moment soft and heavy the next, like countless ghosts wandering in the depths of the woods. Zhao Yunlan looks straight ahead and walks straight ahead... they don't commit evil, nor do they do good. Wandering among the living, they never enter reincarnation, all weeping and wailing, all mourning for themselves.

How many people ever died without regret?

Zhao Yunlan treads through the thickening fog, and his long dark-grey coat sweeps along his path: white mists and groping hands

extending from tombstones can't help but make way. No ghost dares come near him.

Before long, weeps and wails echo through the barren graveyard in the wilderness in the middle of the night. Zhao Yunlan cannot stand it any longer; he stops and flings his hand open. Some talisman papers light up in intense flames. The wails swiftly turn into screeches and countless silhouettes scurry away in chaos. The white mist seems to be flammable, flaring up easily like a fire dragon, spouting out from his palm and instantaneously sweeping the misty graveyard clean.

"If you have complaints, go to the Underworld Court and bang the drum for your grievances. What good does it do you, crying in front of me?" He looks up with a stern face, and sees that the ghostly fire has disappeared.

The night is cold as water, and the starlit sky pristine as if cleansed.

A waning moon hangs in the sky. Freezing gusts of wind are slashing at his skin like sharp knives. Zhao Yunlan pulls up his scarf, almost covering half his face.

At that moment, a voice sounds from beside him, sometimes nearby and sometimes far away, chanting with abrasive coarseness:

Waning moon, barren tombs, will-o'-wisp-lit path of doom;
Bone flutes blown by forest wind; ghosts watch men by foxes
skinned.

This grey wight can offer thee, if you listen close to me,
One human head for silver sold, one beauty's skin for pot of gold;
Half a lifetime's means and wealth, for the boiled oil of a child
Killed before its third month out, you will gain without a doubt.
Seven spirits give to me, furthermore your souls, all three:
If you do so faithfully, from murderous sins I set you free.

Then bad merit is erased, and your next life will be graced.

That voice is like nails scratching on glass, inexplicably agonising in Zhao Yunlan's ears.

Chapter 58

Zhao Yunlan says coldly, "Legend says villains with over-long opening lines usually get one-shot-killed, do you think that's true?"

Hustling noises come from near and far in the woods, like countless fluttering footsteps. Zhao Yunlan flicks on his lighter, the small flame rising high, shedding light in a small halo.

Suddenly, when he turns around, a stubby figure flashes by behind him. It floats in the air for a second before it vanishes, leaving behind a sheer trail dissolving faster than the eye can see.

Laughter sounds, like the nightly squeals of obituary birds.

Zhao Yunlan stands silently in place for a while, but that thing seems to be wary of him; it only floats around cautiously, emerging and vanishing, but never getting too close to him.

Suddenly, the long whipcord shoots out with a whirling vortex and traps the creature by the waist at a strangely precise angle. Zhao Yunlan flicks his wrist, making the end of the whip snap downwards. A muffled screech comes from the creature, and it falls to the ground. As he takes a closer look, he can see that it's a humanoid figure barely a metre tall.

It isn't clear if the creature is male or female: its entire face is covered in wrinkles, and it has an exceptionally prominent nose, which takes up over half of the face with almost no space left for eyes and mouth. At a glance, it looks like an ominous bird; the tiny eyes are pitch black, with no white to be seen, emanating a sinister vibe. When it smirks suddenly, jagged and crooked yellow teeth are visible.

Zhao Yunlan gets down on one knee, resting his arm on his other knee, and stares at that person. "Hey, what the hell are you?"

That person glares at him eerily, and says with a grating voice, "Puny kid, you don't know the vastness of the sky and the depth of the earth."

"Ow." Zhao Yunlan eyes it up and down. "So tell me, just how high and how deep?"

He takes out a pack of cigarettes, and with a flick of his wrist, a cigarette lands in his mouth. The lighter somersaults in his hand, sparks fly, and the cigarette lights up with a crackle. Mint-flavoured smoke envelops the person, who leans back and starts coughing incessantly.

Zhao Yunlan is still holding the other end of the whip, and without untying it, he asks, "Just now you were offering trades?"

The creature hmphs. "Right, you got anything to offer?"

Zhao Yunlan ignores that, and asks, squinting his eyes, "So the Ink Brush of Virtue is with you?"

The person says nothing; cunning, small eyes glare at Zhao Yunlan like those of a viper.

Zhao Yunlan flicks ash off his cigarette and picks the short creature up by the collar, lifting it up to eye-level. "I don't believe that the Four Artefacts have all been unearthed like carrots. Who sent you? And who told you to lure me here with a fake Ink Brush of Virtue?"

A sinister smile emerges on the creature's face, making it look more and more like a gigantic bird. It says in its hoarse voice, "Someone you can't afford to mess with."

Zhao Yunlan isn't angered by that, but rather, he laughs. With his cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, he says lazily, "There are only two people I can't afford to mess with: my mum, and my wife; look at your face, do you think you meet the aesthetic standards of either of them?"

Not waiting for a response, he throws the person to the ground, stomping fiercely on its stumpy body. The smile on his face is gone, and he says coldly, "I'm growing impatient, don't make me kill you. Speak!"

The person under his foot glares up at him with a strange expression, and growls, "South west of the West Sea, north west of the North Sea⁷⁰, fifty thousand miles inland. Encircled by the winding Ruoshui River, eliminating the portal to the skies, sinking into the pathway to Heaven;⁷¹ such awe-inspiring boldness, do you remember still?"

Zhao Yunlan replies with no expression, "You should tell that to my wife, I always failed literature when I was a kid."

The creature cackles coldly; it moves its deformed shoulders with great difficulty, reaching into its bosom and pulling out a small golden bell. "Then what about this: do you not remember this either?"

Goosebumps crawl up his skin as he sees the bell. Bells can reach the spirit world, and are usually used to summon souls and gather spirits. He's missing a soul fire on his left shoulder, so his soul is naturally unstable compared to a regular human. Without hesitation, he stomps and breaks the other's arm and reaches for the small golden bell, bending down.

And yet as his hand touches it, he finds it impossible to lift up. The tiny bell, only the size of a fingernail, seems to weigh more than a dozen tonnes. His wrist is in agony as the bell weighs down on his hand, not moving even a millimetre.

The shorty laughs heartily. "Oh the almighty and great... can't even lift a bell. Muahahahaha, is there anything in this world that's more absurd?"

At that instant, a sweeping rush of mystical wind assaults them. The bell, still hanging on the shorty's broken arm, rings lightly. Zhao Yunlan's nerves tense up instantly; the whip in his hand uncurls outwards, swatting away a huge sphere of ghost fire until it hits a tree. In the blink of an eye, the thick tree is completely scorched and charred, withering as it's drained of life.

Afterwards, more huge lumps of ghost fire approach on the wind; Zhao Yunlan's whip whirls thrice, but he's soon forced to retreat twenty metres.

He can't help but feel that as the end of the year approaches, apart from his love life, all other areas of his life have been victims of bad luck. Not only is he penniless, the kinds of criminals he has to deal with seem to get increasingly devious and cunning.

White bone claws emerge from underneath the tombstones all over the mountain and start crawling across the ground. The shorty who just now was lying crushed under his foot is floating agilely mid-air, surrounded by three hundred sixty degrees of roaring ghost fire. The small golden bell hanging on its broken finger begins to swing lightly in the wind, emitting a subtle and barely audible ring. Dark energy gathers among the mountains and huge swarms of white mist emerge from where they were hibernating in the canopy layer. The trees soon wither and die; a crow shrieks a long screech and soars from a tree into the dark and endless night sky. At some point, the moon has started glowing with a blood-red hue.

Zhao Yunlan knows that tonight probably won't end well.

He puts out the cigarette and sprints towards the edge of the woods. "Hey, don't start attacking for no reason, you haven't told me why

you lured me here yet."

Suddenly, Zhao Yunlan is the world peace ambassador, never mind he just broke someone else's arm.

"You don't want to fight me, do you?" Zhao Yunlan says. "I'm always at the office, and I rarely work out, I'm no good at fighting. Perhaps we could resolve this in a more civil way, what do you think?"

The shorty only gives him a mirthless grin.

With ghost fire hot on his tail, Zhao Yunlan swiftly climbs up a big tree, hanging on to it with his bare hands. He somersaults down, turning in mid-air so he'll land facing away from the tree. Getting down on one knee to buffer the impact, he looks at the shorty and asks, "Reviving dead corpses, manipulating ghost fire... are you a spectral mage or an earth angel? From what I know spectral mages avoid all contact with the living so as not to damage their pure darkness, or cause them to remember incidents from before their deaths. Perhaps you're in fact from the Underworld? But from what department?"

This time the shorty hesitates for a moment, then denies, "The Underworld is nothing, I wouldn't bother getting involved with them!"

"Ah." Zhao Yunlan nods. "I understand what that means. So you must be from one of the shifter tribes, but which one?"

The shorty knows he has said too much, and shuts up.

Zhao Yunlan's eyes twitch, and dimples emerge on his face. "You don't have to say it, just from your look, you're probably one of 'those who can hear the dead,' from the Crow Tribe, no? Well, after this I'm gonna have to talk to the tribe elders. I've always been quite close to the shifter tribes—maybe not to the point that we're brothers, but we're always friendly with each other. What do you think you're doing now?"

The shorty cannot let him keep guessing, and has abruptly begun jiggling the bell in its hand. At this time, Zhao Yunlan laughs, and takes out both his hands from behind his back.

At some point, he has made a cut in his finger, and used blood to draw a complicated symbol between two paper talismans, each forming one half, and together they merge into one whole.

The two pieces have already quietly burnt up, one towards the sky and the other towards the earth.

Zhao Yunlan lets go of the talismans, and lightning strikes from the sky just as a flaming dragon emerges from the earth. Heavenly lightning and Hellfire instantly sear and char the entire mountain of tombstones until everything is black. Countless ghost fires are sucked into the vortex, devoured without a sound. Massive flames set the short crow's clothes ablaze, and yet the vile-looking shifter stands in place unmoving.

It may be of little stature, but in that moment, the look on that hideous face is one of stoicism.

Zhao Yunlan locks eyes with the creature and is stunned.

Even though he can summon lightning and fire, keeping them under control or stopping them is beyond his ability. Zhao Yunlan extends a hand, as if he wants to pull the other out, or say something.

Suddenly, the shorty is engulfed in flames, with a half-human and half-bird face, grows black crow feathers, and spreads out a pair of shrivelled and deformed wings. The feathers instantly go up in flames, and what remains on his back looks like a pair of grilled New Orleans chicken wings, pathetically grotesque.

The shorty screeches towards the sky, transforms into a cloud of black smoke, and enters into the golden bell.

The flare surrounding the golden bell changes colour at once, like a million streaks of blinding light fusing and condensing in one place. Zhao Yunlan hastily closes his eyes, but it's too late: extreme pain radiates from his eyeballs as he rapidly stumbles backwards, arms stretched out and completely blind. But the sound of the bell is piercing his ears.

Momentarily, he seems to hear the sound of mountains crumbling, the pillars holding up the sky rupturing and crashing down with incessant thundering roars, as if the sky is falling down altogether.

Zhao Yunlan feels someone behind him. Someone who must have watched in the shadows for long, watching two dogs fight for a bone, and now comes in, reaching out to grab his shoulder.

Zhao Yunlan struggles to hold himself up in a state of dizziness. He steps aside and his whip comes swirling towards the one behind him. And yet he cannot see or hear anything, and knows not where the whip goes. After a small noise, a great force is exerted from the other end of the whip, pulling him forward.

Zhao Yunlan isn't afraid of losing the whip; he instantly lets go with rapid reflex.

Then, a ghastly hand reaches his nape, fully demonstrating mastery of fishing in troubled waters. Zhao Yunlan passes out in that someone's arms.

Ghost Face's giant cloak covers the burning fire, putting it out instantly, and the thunder and lightning are fading as well.

Seemingly without much effort, he grabs Zhao Yunlan and picks up the anvil-heavy bell with just two fingers. Examining it closely, he sniggers, hides it in his sleeve, and leaves.

Shen Wei leaves the empty apartment and rushes to No. 4 Bright Avenue. But he finds that all lights are out, and only the ghosts are there, still working meticulously. Shen Wei feels like an ant in a hot pan. Finally, he heads to the backyard and takes several deep breaths to calm down, just barely managing. Forcing himself to stay focused, he begins spreading his senses, feeling around for Zhao Yunlan's whereabouts.

He's astonished to find that Zhao Yunlan is coming towards him.

Where was he all night, and why is he heading back to the SIU?

Shen Wei turns around abruptly, and finds a familiar figure floating mid-air.

The expression on the usually gentle and polite Professor Shen changes drastically.

Ghost Face calmly eyes the Ghost Slayer's blade pointing at his chin, not at all frightened. Rather, he patiently tidies up Zhao Yunlan's messy clothes, and laughs softly. "When he sees you he's all smiles, following you around, pleasing you, virtually inseparable; when he sees me, he gives me a whipping. Do you see just how biased he is?"

Shen Wei growls between his teeth, "Let go! Don't touch him with your filthy hands."

"Filthy hands?" Ghost Face chuckles. "So you must be very clean?"

Shen Wei's face freezes.

With a soft titter, Ghost Face throws Zhao Yunlan forward. Shen Wei hastily puts the blade away to avoid hurting him, and catches him, wrapping him in his arms.

"The other side never treated you like one of their own, but I'm different." Ghost Face says with patience. "I want you to think carefully about who treats you better. Harming yourself for people who don't matter, is that really worth it?"

After a glance at Zhao Yunlan, he continues. "And what kind of person are you? Whom wouldn't you be able to have, if you wanted them? Even if so... is there really a need for you to fret over your gains and losses, and desire something you'll never get? Even I pity you."

Shen Wei says coldly, "No need for you to worry."

Ghost Face's mask wears an eerie smile, "Fine, don't regret it."

Ghost Face turns around, his huge cloak swirling up, and vanishes into the night sky.

Shen Wei immediately takes Zhao Yunlan back to his apartment. Zhao Yunlan's injuries don't look to be serious, just small scratches and bruises. His nape has a red mark, probably left by a striking palm that knocked him unconscious. Other than that, Shen Wei can't see anything wrong with him, and so he impatiently sits beside the bed, waiting for him to wake up.

Zhao Yunlan sleeps until afternoon the next day. His phone rings several times but he stays in bed, not moving at all.

As the sun is in the south, his fingers begin moving. The anxious Shen Wei instantly grabs his hand, shaking it gently. Nervously, he says, "Yunlan?"

Zhao Yunlan rubs his neck even before he opens his eyes. "Fuck, which son of a bitch..."

Shen Wei is half-relieved seeing that Zhao Yunlan is swearing, but then Zhao Yunlan calls his name again with a deep, nasal voice.

Shen Wei hastily asks, "Uh, what?"

Zhao Yunlan seems to be only half-conscious still, and he asks, puzzled, "What time is it, why are you still up? Why didn't you turn on the lights?"

Chapter 59

Shen Wei freezes for a few moments. Then he extends his hand slowly, in the blazing noon sunlight, and waves it in front of Zhao Yunlan's eyes.

Zhao Yunlan's gaze has a subtle hint of misery and confusion, and he doesn't react to Shen Wei's movements at all. Shen Wei's heart plunges downwards.

From his silence, Zhao Yunlan senses that something is wrong, and reflexively turns to the side. "Shen Wei?"

Zhao Yunlan frowns, and suddenly he extends his hand, precisely grabbing on to Shen Wei's hand, like he expected Shen Wei to make such a move. Shen Wei's hand is cold as porcelain. After a moment of silence, Zhao Yunlan says, "Oh... so something's wrong with my eyes?"

His eyes can't see, and so Zhao Yunlan's gaze appears especially miserable, floating around without a place to rest on. Shen Wei clenches his fists and forces his voice to stay low. "I'll get you to the hospital right away."

On their way, Zhao Yunlan is exceptionally quiet, barely saying anything at all. Who knows what he's thinking. After getting out of the car, he walks with an occasionally perplexed look on his face.

It's really distressing for an ordinary man to suddenly lose his eyesight. He doesn't know which leg to raise when he walks, and he can't help but to grab at everything he can reach... even though Shen Wei is holding his hand.

Sometimes he cannot tell in which direction Shen Wei is pulling him, especially when they're making a turn.

Those who don't see well usually have their other senses sharpened, but that is the result of long-term habit and subconscious training. If a person suddenly loses the ability to see, their reflexes are slowed, and they can't help but concentrate too much on what they're hearing. Without vision, it's difficult to discern what all the sounds represent; on top of that, Zhao Yunlan's sense of balance is affected as well, and it takes him a long time to react to Shen Wei pulling him.

Perhaps Ghost Face hit him quite hard, or it's the many injuries he has accrued, but Shen Wei finds his face exceptionally pale. Zhao Yunlan seems to be too calm about going blind: he isn't panicking, nor is he whining. He only wears an emotionless look, his eyebrows turned down in a subtle frown.

Shen Wei is well aware that Zhao Yunlan normally makes the same face as well, it's only that he changes his expression instantly when he finds someone looking at him... but now he can't tell if people are looking or not.

Shen Wei's expression is abruptly clouded, his eyes shooting daggers. Yet his hands help Zhao Yunlan move forward with increasing tenderness.

The nurses are almost trembling in fear as they take Zhao Yunlan from him. They can't help but find this bespectacled gentleman very much like the low-profile mafiosi one sees in crime movies: gangsters who slaughter people like pigs but pray to Buddha and are vegetarians.

As expected, Zhao Yunlan's eyes don't have any discernible problems: no injuries, no diseases, and yet he can't see... the doctors find it very strange, and after almost an entire day, they

subtly imply that temporary blindness could have a mental cause, and advise him to see a psychiatrist.

When they're out of the hospital, the sky is already dark. And finally, like a sturdy cockroach, Zhao Yunlan adjusts to life as a blind man with shocking speed.

As they leave the hospital, Zhao Yunlan grabs Shen Wei. "The sky is probably dark."

Shen Wei is most afraid of him not talking, so he hastily tries to get him to say more. "How did you know?"

"I feel the air is a little wetter, and cooler, so the sun has probably set."

Shen Wei opens the car door, one hand leading his way, the other blocking the ceiling of the car so he won't bump his head. Then he bends down and helps him fasten his seatbelt, and as he gets up, he sees Zhao Yunlan smiling. "Why are you smiling?"

"I was thinking, if one day I'm old and dumb, and you're still willing to take care of me like this, what if I don't recognise people anymore, and I call you daddy?"

Shen Wei is dumbstruck.

Although he's happy to see Zhao Yunlan smile, sometimes Shen Wei really cannot understand his eccentric sense of humour.

Zhao Yunlan fantasises for a while, and even laughs. His hands start wandering everywhere; Shen Wei sits in the driver's seat and takes his hand. Zhao Yunlan shakes it a little. "Oi, if I call you daddy you mustn't answer, don't take advantage of me when I'm stupid."

Shen Wei is rather helpless. "If only you were stupid."

"What?" Zhao Yunlan feigns astonishment, and holds on to his collar. "What do you want to do to me? Do you want to lock me up for a game of coerced forbidden love?"

Shen Wei blinks. He knows this is just Zhao Yunlan's usual bullshit, and yet he can't help but imagine...

Zhao Yunlan sniggers pervertedly, and continues, "Actually I think that's a possibility."

Shen Wei is silent again.

As the car starts moving, Zhao Yunlan can't stand having been introverted for almost a day, and begins performing his 'hyperactive toddler routine'.

He finds the buttons for adjusting the seat, and he adjusts it back and forth, and to and fro, like a stupid newborn monkey messing around in the car. He also occasionally shares his ideas with Shen Wei: "Hey, tell you what, being blind is actually quite fun. There's a darkness experience showroom in the town centre, and it costs 40 for a ticket, so now I'm saving myself 40 dollars."

Shen Wei answers by smiling reluctantly; he really cannot understand how this can be amusing.

Shen Wei stops the car at Zhao Yunlan's place, and reminds him not to move. And yet, once the car is stopped, Shen Wei finds Zhao Yunlan walking on to the street on his own, practising walking in a straight line like walking on stilts.

The straight line isn't bad, it's just that he's heading straight into a street lamp.

This guy just likes getting himself in trouble...

Shen Wei rushes forward and picks Zhao Yunlan up by the waist so Zhao Yunlan's ribs rest on Shen Wei's shoulder.

Perhaps it's a thrilling experience to be lifted into the air while blind; when Shen Wei puts him down, Zhao Yunlan whistles merrily.

"I find that my balance is still okay, I can walk a straight line." Zhao Yunlan says, and then he lowers his voice, "Perhaps I can even..."

Even what, Shen Wei can't hear, but he sees him smiling softly.

Shen Wei pats his arm and bends down. "There are stairs ahead, I'll carry you."

Zhao Yunlan stands aside, smiling, and not saying a word.

Shen Wei turns around, and asks gently, "What? Come on."

Zhao Yunlan finds Shen Wei's hand, caresses it softly, and then lifts it up and lowers his head for a kiss on the back of his hand. "I can't let you carry me, I'm too heavy, what if you hurt yourself?"

Shen Wei has no reply for that.

Zhao Yunlan probably doesn't know who carried him home last night.

After saying that, Zhao Yunlan slowly walks forward. If he hadn't kicked at the stairs lightly to check where they are, Shen Wei might have thought he got his sight back.

He goes upstairs, head up and chest out; smoothly mounting the stairs one step at a time, each step the same distance, and reaches the elevator eventually. He finds the button, presses it, and then stands aside waiting for Shen Wei.

Shen Wei intentionally walks with heavy footsteps. "How did you know the elevator was here?"

Zhao Yunlan says arrogantly and shamelessly, "As observant as I am, of course I know the place I live in inside and out! How many steps in the staircase, how many steps from the stairs to the elevator, I don't need to see, I know all that."

Shen Wei knows he's bullshitting, as if he's really that smart... he can't even find his tea cup and slippers without running his hands over everything.

He must have counted the steps and remembered them when he left the apartment in the afternoon.

It's probably in his nature: no matter what happens, Zhao Yunlan always gives other people the feeling that things are no big deal. Sometimes even when other people know it really is a big deal, they can't help but be influenced by his attitude.

He's just so keen on keeping his dignity intact.

Zhao Yunlan opens the door and goes inside, and he hears a voice from below. "If you dare step your stinky foot on to my tail you're dead."

"Da Qing?"

Zhao Yunlan bends down and pats him. Da Qing instantly feels that something's wrong; he climbs up his arm and stands on his shoulder, watching closely, and asks, "What's with your eyes?"

Zhao Yunlan walks into the apartment with his hands finding the way. "My skills have taken some damage," he says carelessly.

Shen Wei pulls him back. "Careful."

Zhao Yunlan almost bumps into the doorframe.

Da Qing is astonished. He pounces off of him and then quickly onto the sofa. "What happened!?" He instinctively looks at Shen Wei, greatly puzzled... since Shen Wei has already been to No. 4 Bright Avenue, Da Qing really doesn't need to hide the fact that he's a talking cat.

Shen Wei immediately says, "It's my fault."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. "How the hell is this your fault now?"

His hand grabs at air, and Da Qing looks at the hand hanging mid-air and, wearing an annoyed cat face with squinting eyes that says, 'I'm only doing this because I pity you,' nudges his head into Zhao Yunlan's palm.

Zhao Yunlan smiles, and says randomly, "Don't be worried, there's no weal without woe."

He finds the sofa and sits down, takes out a cigarette, and hands it bossily to Da Qing. "I can't see, light it for me!"

After a moment of silence, Da Qing quietly rolls up into a ball of fur, facing away, ignoring him.

Shen Wei takes his hand, lights the cigarette with a fizzling flick, and hands him the ashtray.

"Last night I ran into a little crow shifter," Zhao Yunlan ponders and succinctly summarises what happened the other night, with only a bit of cherry-picking. He continues, "And he said to me something about... uh, some place of the West Sea, and some place of the North Sea, how many miles from the shore, and then a bit I didn't quite understand; probably talking about a mountain."

Da Qing is stunned, but Shen Wei instantly understands, and his face darkens. "Don't talk about that; how did you hurt your eyes?"

"Don't even mention it." Zhao Yunlan waves, and briefly describes this most unfortunate experience, clearly expressing his hatred towards bells.

Da Qing suddenly stands up. "What kind of bell?"

"I have it." Shen Wei puts his hand in his pocket, and takes out a dusty little golden bell, "Are you talking about this?"

Da Qing's irises contract, and not waiting for Zhao Yunlan to reply, interrupts, "Why is this with you?"

Shen Wei looks at Zhao Yunlan, pauses, and says cryptically, "Well... the person who sent you back last night gave it to me."

Da Qing goes in a circle around Shen Wei's hand, staring at the small bell for a while, and suddenly says with a lowered voice, "That's mine."

"That's from my... first owner." Da Qing glances at Zhao Yunlan. "He put it round my neck, about a hundred years ago, but I lost it because of some accident."

Zhao Yunlan extends his hand. "Let me see."

Shen Wei retracts his hand. "You probably can't lift it up yet."

Now that he thinks of the dark events of the other night, Zhao Yunlan blows out a melancholy ring of smoke; can't even lift up the bell his own cat wears round its neck... just how pathetic does that sound!

That very moment, Da Qing lowers his head, snatches the bell with his mouth, and without a word, jumps out the window.

As plump and carefree as he usually is, it's quite rare for him to seem so emotionally affected.

Zhao Yunlan perks up. "Da Qing?"

"Gone." Shen Wei closes the window, bends down, and caresses the corner of Zhao Yunlan's eye. "I will find a way to cure you."

Zhao Yunlan thinks of something, and suddenly chuckles, "Actually there's no hurry."

Shen Wei has a feeling that he'll follow this up with something indecent. As expected, Zhao Yunlan is still as perverted and persistent as ever, even when blind, and he continues, "Now that I can't see, it really is quite inconvenient; could you take a shower with me tonight?"

Shen Wei swats away the filthy and lascivious paws that have somehow started molesting his behind.

Without a word, he turns around and heads for the kitchen.

Zhao Yunlan puts on a smile, closes his eyes, and leans against the sofa. He listens to the clinking and clanging from the kitchen, and in sheer darkness, he feels a rare sense of tranquility. He's almost enjoying this moment, and as he's more and more relaxed, he suddenly sees some strange shadows, vaguely in the distance.

He abruptly opens his eyes, and yet he still can't see a thing. The shadows are gone.

Zhao Yunlan calms his mind and concentrates. He closes his eyes again, counting his breaths and ridding his mind of excess thoughts, and he begins to see a few shadows after a moment. On his left, he sees a lump of green, glowing and flickering, very softly, and with an exceptional beauty in its flowing movements... The shape is rather familiar.

After a while Zhao Yunlan thinks of it: that's the direction of the window sill, and there's a potted plant he got as a gift from a friend.

This is... the third eye.

It seems the third eye between his eyebrows doesn't depend on normal eyesight.

Zhao Yunlan concentrates on the spot between his eyebrows and begins to see his surroundings clearly. He's 'seeing' more and more things around him: the flowers on the window sill, the cat fur on the couch, some antique books on the bookshelf... and the reportedly precious antique painting on the wall.

But things like the sofa, the coffee table, the bed... things without spiritual energy are still invisible to him.

Zhao Yunlan 'looks' down at his own body, and sees a swirl of white light flowing through it; a blazing ball of light is hanging on his right shoulder, but on his left, there's nothing.

This kind of light is very familiar... he feels he must have seen it somewhere before.

Suddenly, Zhao Yunlan stands up, his knees heavily crashing onto the coffee table, but he doesn't care as he stumbles into the kitchen.

He hears the sound of chopping, but doesn't see Shen Wei, who's merged with darkness, or even darker than darkness... The only thing visible is the small pendant, which holds a sphere of dazzling flame, identical to the ball of light on his right shoulder.

Chapter 60

Shen Wei is handling a Chinese cabbage; he hears a sound and turns his head to look at Zhao Yunlan. "It's messy in here, don't come in."

Zhao Yunlan ignores him and carefully walks inside while holding on to the walls, heading towards Shen Wei's voice. He slowly reaches out with his hands and embraces Shen Wei from behind; his chin resting on Shen Wei's shoulder, his eyes closed.

First, he tries to 'look' at the chopping board, but the vegetables are all derooted and frozen, so he can't 'see' anything. Then he sniffs, and barely smells a faint scent of vegetable juice.

He lowers his head, and he sees Shen Wei's incredibly coal-black body overflowing with a blush of blood-red the moment he hugs him. The colours flow from his heart, gushing out like magma, and instantly saturate Shen Wei's entire body. In Zhao Yunlan's murky vision, a slender and svelte silhouette is outlined.

It's as if... the dark shadow is suddenly given life.

The sight stuns Zhao Yunlan into silence for a while. Then, without showing it on his face, he half-seriously complains to Shen Wei, "What are you cutting? I don't wanna eat this, I want meat. I'm not a rabbit, I'm disabled now, and I have the right to better meals."

He hears Shen Wei laughing softly, lifting the lid on a small pot slightly, and the aroma of meat wafts out. "I made what you like, but you have to eat a bit of everything, don't be picky."

As he says this, the flaming colours on his body are lightened, and the swiftly flowing scarlet transforms into a tinge of exceptionally

warm cherry pink... like the colour at the break of dawn, when one first sees the sun rise and shine.

Shen Wei lets him keep hugging and doesn't push him away. Zhao Yunlan swings left and right with Shen Wei's movements, listening to the sound of the vegetable knife chopping on the chopping board. Zhao Yunlan doesn't speak for a long while; his eyes a deep black, looking down, but not with gloom, only with inexplicable darkness.

After a long time, Zhao Yunlan nudges forward, and asks randomly, "Hey, do you think I'm handsome?"

Shen Wei's hands stop moving, and he shakes his head helplessly. "Do you ever have anything decent to say?"

"Oh, something decent." Zhao Yunlan clears his throat, and announces beside Shen Wei's ear with great enunciation, like a news reporter, "Comrade Shen Wei, do you find this man beside you, this colossus of cognition, this pioneer in his career, who bathes in the comfortable breeze of a peaceful society, handsome or not?"

Shen Wei has nothing to say in response; after a while, he only smiles lightly. He looks down, cutting the vegetables into thin slices; even a simple task like this seems to warrant his full concentration. Then he says softly, "It doesn't matter whether you're handsome or not, I don't care. Even if you were hideous with warts and lumps all over, in my heart, there is no difference."

Zhao Yunlan says with a lowered voice, "So touching, in a moment, you'll be proposing to me."

Even though they're at home, and there are only the two of them here, they're in the kitchen after all, which isn't a place for intimacy. Shen Wei is somewhat embarrassed, and shoves Zhao Yunlan away with his shoulder. "Move, I have to fry the vegetables. Go sit outside, don't give me trouble."

Zhao Yunlan obediently lets go, steps backwards, and his hands touch the cold metal edge of the sink.

Suddenly, he says half-unintentionally, "Then would you ever lie to me?"

Shen Wei freezes, his back facing Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "Would you?"

Shen Wei takes a deep breath, still not turning around. After a moment, he says with a deep voice, "I will never lie to you, and I will never hurt you."

Zhao Yunlan uses the third eye to search for his shadow. He sees very clearly that the shining lights on Shen Wei's body gradually grow dim and fade away, like fireworks dying down. An inexplicable surge of sadness springs up all of a sudden.

And so he nods. "Uh, good, then I believe you."

Shen Wei turns around abruptly. "Just a few words, and you believe me?"

Zhao Yunlan smiles unexpectedly. "As long as you say so, I believe you."

After he says this, he can no longer bear to 'look' at the waxing and waning radiance on Shen Wei's body. Zhao Yunlan turns around and pretends that the conversation they just had was merely chitchat, forgotten in the blink of an eye. He runs his hands through every compartment in the cupboard and mumbles, "Where's my beef jerky, I remember I have a pack of beef somewhere..."

Inadvertently, he bumps into a plastic broom, steps on it, and almost falls flat on his face.

Shen Wei's hands are covered in vegetable juice, and he doesn't want to make him dirty, so he reaches out his arm and blocks him mid-air. Zhao Yunlan falls right into his embrace.

Zhao Yunlan's apartment isn't very big. The kitchen is so small that it's barely suitable for one person. With two big men cramped inside, they can hardly move at all. Shen Wei can only keep this pose, extending his hands forward, washing them under the faucet. His chin naturally rests on Zhao Yunlan's shoulder.

Zhao Yunlan suddenly doesn't speak anymore, nor does he move.

After Shen Wei cleans his hands, he keeps the same pose, hands guarding Zhao Yunlan's waist, and tries to push him outside. "They probably expired a long time ago, stop looking for them. There are some snacks under the table, I just put them there; if you're hungry you can eat some. But don't eat too much, dinner's almost ready."

Zhao Yunlan looks down and smiles. "I'm starving, but I don't want to eat rice."

Shen Wei is stunned. "Eh? Then what do you want to eat?"

Zhao Yunlan turns his head to the side, finds Shen Wei's chin, and runs his hand along the jawbone, reaching the ear. He leans towards Shen Wei's ear and whispers, "I wanna eat you."

When he says this, his gaze 'looks' directly at Shen Wei's face. Zhao Yunlan's eye sockets are very deep, irises intensely black, and as his eyelids are half-down, his eyelashes cast a shadow onto the high bridge of his nose... although Shen Wei knows he cannot see anything, there's still the false impression that his gaze is full of passion.

Shen Wei finds his spirit quivering under that piercing gaze.

Zhao Yunlan leans even closer, smiling, and sniffs the scent of shampoo in Shen Wei's hair. He kisses him on the cheek. "Why are you so nervous? You can give it a try, I'm very gentle."

Shen Wei doesn't say a word, throws him on to the sofa, and retreats quickly.

Zhao Yunlan extends his legs, sitting on the couch like a boss. He thinks he really should order two red candlesticks and light them up beside the bed at night⁷². Perhaps only in a wedding atmosphere can he get this conservative gentleman's clothes off.

By the time night has truly fallen, Zhao Yunlan's heart is itching all over. Shen Wei is afraid that Zhao Yunlan might be bored, being blind, and so he takes up a book, leans back against the headboard of the bed, and reads to him.

Shen Wei's voice is mellow and tender, with perfect sonority. Although Zhao Yunlan is listening to him surrounded by the aroma of books, he doesn't actually feel like he's getting any more educated; in fact, he only wants to unleash his inner beast even more.

While Zhao Yunlan is torn between suffering and joy, Shen Wei seems to sense something. He suddenly stops reading and turns towards the window with an ambivalent expression. At the same time, without warning, Zhao Yunlan grabs Shen Wei in a bear hug and rolls them both over onto the bed. Weighing him down with his body, he whispers beside his ear, "Stop reading. Turn off the lights."

The lights in the apartment go out instantly.

Zhao Yunlan's hand probes under Shen Wei's shirt and runs skilfully along Shen Wei's side from his waist all the way up to his chest. He pinches his nipple, and a surge of numbing sensation rushes towards Shen Wei's head. Shen Wei can no longer process what he just said—he panics and holds Zhao Yunlan's wrist in place.

Zhao Yunlan lowers his head and nibbles softly on his collarbone. He says in an exceptionally flirtatious tone, "You're already hard with just one touch, do you want me so much?"

Shen Wei is incredibly embarrassed, and he almost forgets that someone is outside the window.

At this instant, the faint sound of wooden clappers⁷³ can be heard over the sound of the wind outside. Zhao Yunlan's fingers that were lighting flames along Shen Wei's body quickly write "don't move", and he pulls up the duvet and covers Shen Wei entirely.

Zhao Yunlan sits on the edge of the bed, the buttons on his shirt undone almost all the way, shirttails swaying across his stomach. He says coldly, "If I were alone, Your Honour would be welcome here anytime. But now that I have company, this seems like a bit of an intrusion, doesn't it?"

A soft cough comes from outside. "The Judge heard that the Guardian injured his eyes, so I was sent here to take a look. If I'm bothering you, I'm incredibly..."

"The Judge?" Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrows, and laughs meaningfully. "His Honour sure found out fast. I went to the hospital during the day, and it isn't even midnight now, and he has already sent you here, Your Honour? I'm just fine, tell him that, and thank him for asking."

After a deep "Yes" from outside, the thick cloud of dark energy disappears in just a moment.

Zhao Yunlan searches the bed with his hands, and Shen Wei grabs his wrist. "Underworld messenger? How..."

"You silly bean." Zhao Yunlan sighs, and runs his hand across Shen Wei's hair, stroking gently. He says with a lowered voice, "They're all

plotting against you. The Underworld probably knows about 'Shen Wei', right?"

Shen Wei hesitates, then nods. He has disguised himself as a human and stayed on earth for a few decades already. And all that just to stalk someone; of course he wouldn't announce that publicly. And yet, the Ghost Slayer staying among the living is no trivial matter, so at the very least the Ten Kings of the Underworld have to be informed about it.

Zhao Yunlan frowns. "You really don't have to get involved with the other side; they have their way of thinking, and between humans and ghosts, there are always so many convoluted schemes and plots, and you..."

Shen Wei asks softly, with uncertainty, "Are you... are you worried about me?"

Zhao Yunlan stops. Then he lowers his head towards where the sound is coming from. "What do you think?"

Shen Wei clenches his fists, and suddenly embraces him tightly, his face buried in his nape for a very, very long time. Shen Wei is incredibly strong; Zhao Yunlan very much wants to do something else, seeing that the mood is right, and yet he cannot wriggle out of his embrace at all.

Shen Wei hugs him as tightly as he can, with immense possessiveness. He probably intends to keep hugging till dawn. Zhao Yunlan ponders for a long time, but cannot think of a good plan, and quickly grows drowsy. He doesn't want to fall asleep with a mind full of filthy thoughts. He has never lain in bed so helplessly in his life.

He's so horny his nose might start bleeding.

Perhaps Shen Wei is squeezing too tightly, making him a little uncomfortable. Maybe that's why Zhao Yunlan has a weird dream when he finally falls asleep.

In his dream, he finds himself wandering around in a foggy place filled with ruins and debris all over the ground. Countless people prostrate themselves in worship towards the sky. He looks at them and keeps walking.

Later, he finds himself in a barren place, and in utter darkness. Zhao Yunlan feels inexplicably perturbed, and tries to light a fire by snapping his fingers. The flame dies before it can light up anything. Then, someone sighs beside his ear and says, "I didn't mean it when I said that, did you have to go that far?"

That voice is difficult to describe. It doesn't seem to go through the ear, but instead it goes through the heart. The words pierce through his chest like an ice pick, coldly pouring into his heart. Zhao Yunlan shivers strongly, and wakes up. It seems to be morning already. Shen Wei isn't beside him; he probably went out to buy something.

It's dark when he opens his eyes, and also dark when he closes them. Zhao Yunlan's heart thumps like thunder, thrashing about incessantly. The air in his lungs is almost depleted, and his palms are frigid.

That was... who was talking?

Zhao Yunlan sits on the bed, and pinches between his eyebrows with force. He wipes off cold sweat, which dribbles onto his fingers. His heart is knotted with a million thoughts, and all he can see with his eyes is sheer darkness; he really cannot stand this state for another second.

Chapter 61

Hastily, Zhao Yunlan washes up. He gropes around and finally finds the bandages and medicine they brought back from the hospital on the coffee table. He closes his eyes, wraps a bandage around his head a few times, and takes a piece of paper and a pen from the nightstand. He doesn't care what kind of paper it is; he scrawls some messy words which are supposed to read 'I'm going to No. 4 Bright Avenue,' and leaves the apartment with cautious steps.

His heart, which has been thumping since he woke up from the nightmare, is now gradually quieting with his determined movements.

When the elevator stops at the first floor, Zhao Yunlan adjusts his breathing and concentrates all his energy on the third eye between his eyebrows. He walks outside with big, confident steps.

Zhao Yunlan sees a lot of people coming and going, and he quickly works out that the figures with a weird glowing aura are people. As for those without, he has no idea what they are.

At first, for some reason, his vision isn't very clear; he only sees a blurry layer of shadows and lights. And yet as Zhao Yunlan slowly walks out of the small residential area, he seems to be gradually getting used to this way of 'looking' at the world, and distinct figures are beginning to materialise.

Slowly, he begins to see the Samadhi true fire on everybody, and even the three flowers on their heads. Finally, Zhao Yunlan sees very clearly on someone who passes by that the strange aura on each living person is really a blurry 'membrane', covering the entire person from head to toe, with strange symbols written all over it.

Zhao Yunlan stands still by the road and puts his hand out to hail a taxi. But after all, he can't see, so all he can do is just keep his hand out and hope to get lucky.

By the time he does hail a cab, and has found his way into the car, Zhao Yunlan can already see clearly that the symbols written on people's bodies aren't hieroglyphs after all, they're actual words.

Incredibly small, and incredibly dense, changing every second. Zhao Yunlan can't help but stare at the taxi driver. The driver has addressed him twice before Zhao Yunlan comes to. "Oh, sorry. No. 4 Bright Avenue, just take me to the entrance."

The taxi driver gives the bandages on his eyes a strange look. "Hey, kid, what's with your eyes?"

Zhao Yunlan lies casually. "Hurt my head playing basketball."

The driver goes, "Yikes," and continues, "can you still see?"

"Applied ointment, can't open my eyes," Zhao Yunlan says. "I'll just have to be blind for two days."

They chit-chat along the way and finally arrive at No. 4 Bright Avenue. The taxi stops on the side of the road; Zhao Yunlan ponders, and takes out his wallet, handing it to the driver. "I can't see anyway, just take as much as it costs."

The driver is stunned. "Ah? You trust me?"

Zhao Yunlan smiles. "There isn't a lot of money in there anyway, go on."

The driver hesitates, prints him a receipt, and puts his hand into the wallet. At the same time, Zhao Yunlan stares intently at the ever-changing words on his body. He hears the driver going through his wallet, making rustling sounds, and he also hears him take

something out, hesitate, and put it back. Then he takes out another bank note, counts out change and puts the coins into Zhao Yunlan's wallet.

Zhao Yunlan's lips lift up on one side... his vision is getting clearer and clearer, and he can now tell the colours of the words. He sees both black and red. As the driver puts the change into his wallet, Zhao Yunlan sees a line of small red characters passing over his body.

So that's what it means... he thanks the driver, and tells him there's no need to help him walk. Zhao Yunlan realises that the small words indicate a man's virtue: red is good, and black is evil. Turns out the driver didn't take advantage of him just now.

Then Zhao Yunlan frowns, as he feels that something seems to be awakening within him with an unstoppable speed. He cannot tell whether it's a good or a bad thing.

This feeling... it started when the earthquake unearthed the Awl of Mountains and Rivers.

Was that really a natural earthquake caused by tectonic movements?

The doorkeeper who likes to whittle bones sees him from afar, and merrily puts down his file, greeting him. "Hey, Chief Zhao! Oh? What happened to your eyes?"

"Accident," Zhao Yunlan says calmly. "Lao Li, can you help me a little?"

Lao Li has yet to come forward, when someone else already rushes up from behind. Shen Wei grabs his hand, suppressing the force in his grip and the tremor in his voice with an effort. "Why didn't you wait for me? All I did was go out to buy breakfast, and you were gone

when I came back. Do you know I was worried sick? If you do that again I swear I will..."

Will what?

Shen Wei takes several deep breaths, as his lungs are almost bursting in anger. And yet he can't seem to finish his sentence.

Zhao Yunlan turns towards him, and through the vision of his third eye, which is becoming increasingly bright and clear—he doesn't know why—he sees rows upon rows of bright red characters on Shen Wei's body, representing good virtue.

And yet they don't last. Like a rush of waves, swiftly surging up, they're immediately drenched in a tsunami of darkness and rinsed away. Like a beach on which no markings can ever remain.

Zhao Yunlan's eyes are sore, but he doesn't understand what caused this unexpected surge of soreness. It's as if a section of ancient memories that has been buried deep for hundreds and thousands of years is finally unearthed, a violent wind blowing away a hundred feet of settled dust, revealing the naked truth below it, stabbing into the heart, eliciting wave upon wave of misery.

"That's because I knew you would catch up with me in no time." Zhao Yunlan is close to losing control. He puts on a smooth-talking pretence, but his voice has a subtle tremor that he hopes isn't easily noticeable. "Just in time, go in with me."

Zhao Yunlan makes his grand entrance without having told anyone in advance, which throws the office into utter chaos. Da Qing has gone off sulking somewhere, so the folks of SIU only now realise that their Chief who disappeared for two days wasn't out having fun, but had an accident.

Zhu Hong's hands shiver as she unties the bandages, and when she sees the bright yet unfocused eyes, her own eyes redden.

Zhao Yunlan moves his hand, but realises that since he cannot see, it would be inappropriate to touch a female colleague blindly. He puts down his hand, embarrassed, and says helplessly, "Is it you or me who's blind now? I'm not even crying so what are you getting so worked up about?"

Zhu Hong hurls the bandages in his face. "You, crying? If only you knew how to cry! There's no place in this world you dare not go, and there's no person in this world you dare not mess with, is there? You really think you're the younger brother of the gods above, don't you? Moron!"

Zhao Yunlan stays silent for a while, and replies, "Aye, the moron heard you."

No knives and guns can hurt him, and no words, whether harsh or kind, can get to him. Zhu Hong gives up trying and glares at Shen Wei. And as if she'd eaten gunpowder, her words fire like machine guns. "Don't you like him? Aren't you an expert? What were you doing when this happened?"

Chu Shuzhi and Lin Jing stare at each other in silence; this situation really seems to be somewhat... awkward.

Zhao Yunlan can hear it too. He instantly feels embarrassed, and tries to cover it up with a joke. He pulls at Shen Wei's sleeves, and tries to wear a pretentious smile. "You like me? Why have you never mentioned it? I say, Professor Shen, that's mighty odd of you, if you like me why did you tell her first..."

Zhu Hong doesn't want him to take an easy way out, and interrupts him. "You shut up!"

The smile on Zhao Yunlan's face looks like a drawing, and it instantly wears away. "That's enough from you, I got into an accident on my own, what the hell does it have to do with him? Do we have to be

tied together twenty-four-seven? Tell me that when three-legged races become an Olympic discipline!"

Zhu Hong's gaze almost becomes hostile, and Shen Wei can't help but interrupt, "Actually it was my f..."

Zhao Yunlan frowns and waves his hand, domineeringly - if a bit stiffly - ending the conversation. "I don't want to discuss this now. We can discuss trivial matters later. Shut up for now."

Then, he takes out a Guardian Order talisman and lights it up. He says, "Da Qing, come over here."

With the rings of a kitten bell replacing his voice, Da Qing emerges from the corner and silently passes by everyone. He jumps onto Zhao Yunlan's legs and examines his eyes.

Then Da Qing jumps onto the table. "I thought about it for a long time, and went through some books. I roughly know what's wrong with your eyes now. You said you summoned Hellfire, burning the little crow, and then it sacrificed itself and entered the golden bell, right? The sound of its soul collided with Hellfire, and the amount of dark energy must have skyrocketed. You were standing too close, so your eyes were injured, and you're temporarily blind."

Zhao Yunlan nods subtly, but Shen Wei notices what the black cat said. "Temporarily?"

Da Qing confirms, but then looks at Zhao Yunlan.

In fact, it feels like Zhao Yunlan already knows something.

But Shen Wei doesn't notice. He's somewhat preoccupied in his anxiety, and he keeps asking, "When can he recover? What medicine does he need? Where to find it?"

Da Qing silently glances at Shen Wei, and sees that he's genuinely concerned. With a sigh in his heart, he continues, "The Flower Tribe usually stay hidden from the rest of the world. But they have an extraordinarily precious kind of honey, the Thousand Flowers. Legends say that this kind of honey is made from thirty three kinds of flowers from the Heavens, thirty three kinds from Earth, and thirty three kinds from the Underworld, and taking only the purest essence from the nectar of each flower. It can cure all kinds of toxins, it heals and revitalises, and is the most suitable for eye injuries... if you want to find them, probably..."

Zhao Yunlan softly continues, "In the Tribes Market at the end of the year."

Da Qing asks bluntly, "How did you know?"

Zhao Yunlan pats Da Qing's head, but doesn't answer. He seems to be pondering something. Then, after a while, he says with a low voice, "You're done now, so it's my turn to say something... First, from now on, whoever contacts the Underworld must send me a transcript, don't leave anything out. Second, No. 4 Bright Avenue is now strictly forbidden for persons who don't have legitimate business with us; those who come with gifts during the New Year can just stop by the reception office. Third, tell other departments that we're entering the finalising period at the end of the year, so unless the Commissioner hands down a case directly, try not to take any cases. Fourth, if anyone under the Guardian Order cannot come to work on time or has to take leave of absence, I must have signed and approved it. I need to know your whereabouts at all times."

Zhu Hong loses focus for a little, and asks, "So the Tribes Market..."

"That's not a big deal, Shen Wei can go with me." Zhao Yunlan pauses. "I'll have them set up a room for you on the third floor, if you need to rest you can go there."

Not caring about the others' reactions, he stands up, holding on to the desk. He walks towards the library in the wall. "I need to talk to Sang Zan. Shen Wei, wait for me. You others inform the other departments of what I just said."

The library is brightly lit, yet without a ray of sunlight, so Sang Zan can freely spend time there even during the day. He sees Zhao Yunlan, and happily greets him, "Hallu, Shiev Zhao Yunlan studdera!"

Zhao Yunlan stays silent for a while, and comments, "What the heck, who taught you that?"

"Cat studdera." Sang Zan knows his pronunciation isn't accurate, so he diligently practises to get it right, "Shie... Chies... Zhao Yunlan studdera!"

Zhao Yunlan smiles, and doesn't mind him. He looks around with the third eye, and finds that he can see the shape of most of the books. He searches around for a while, then says to Sang Zan, "Get me the book I read the other day."

Sang Zan swiftly takes out the Book of Souls. It's quite impressive that although he can't read any words, he clearly remembers where each and every one of them is.

Zhao Yunlan clearly 'sees' the words 'Book of Souls' on the cover. And before he moves, the book opens itself, and he sees something he didn't notice before: a page has been torn off, and under the vision of the third eye, the torn page seems to be dripping with violet blood.

Zhao Yunlan slams the book shut. Sang Zan peeks at his expression, and Zhao Yunlan doesn't say a word.

After a long while, Zhao Yunlan asks in a deep voice, "Do you believe there are perfect 'coincidences' in this world?"

Sang Zan thinks very hard, and after some time he finally figures out what "coincidence" means. Because he cannot speak with clarity, he always appears a little dumb. But after all, he isn't actually dumb, everybody knows that.

Sang Zan shakes his head, and says with rare accuracy, "I don't."

"Neither do I," Zhao Yunlan says slowly. "The shifter tribes seem to be friendly with the Underworld, but they really aren't. I hold the Guardian Order Token, and all I really want to do is fulfil my own responsibility and protect the realm of the living, then enjoy my happy life with the wifey and the fat cat. But some people just don't want to give me an easy time."

That outburst was far too complex, so Sang Zan doesn't understand. And yet he gives Zhao Yunlan a look of comprehension, and asks directly, "How can I help yar?"

Zhao Yunlan lowers his eyes. "Hand me a piece of paper."

He writes down what the crow shifter said the other night. It turns out he was feigning ignorance; in fact, he can remember every single word. Then, under the final line, he writes "Kunlun" with broad characters, and a heavy turn of the pen at the last stroke.

"I want all books with this word," Zhao Yunlan says. "Don't tell anyone about this, including Wang Zheng. Thank you, brother."

Sang Zan treats him as half a saviour. Though he used to be a cunning and manipulative schemer, deep down he knows good from evil. He promises Zhao Yunlan formally, "Don't worry, Chief Zhao studdera."

Zhao Yunlan says half-jokingly, "Good, I'll kick that fat fuck's fat ass for ya."

Chapter 62

The Tribes Market in Dragon City is held on December 28 of the lunar calendar, which is the second last day of the year.

In the morning, Zhao Yunlan receives his invitation, delivered by a sparrow to his window.

His office has been brightly cleaned by housekeeping, the windows are crystal clear and the tables are gleaming. On one side is a giant ceiling-to-floor window which faces the sun. When the curtains are open, the winter sunshine falls inside in a broad beam. With ample air conditioning, one can comfortably stay indoors with just a shirt on. Two pots of alocasia plants drip with morning dew in lush viridescence. There's also an aquarium by the door, with silver arowana fish swimming leisurely.

The hi-fi set is playing a soothing guqin piece. In the spacious office, the two men enjoy their own space... Shen Wei comes in to water the plants, and then sits aside to read a book, like a temporary assistant. Zhao Yunlan asks him to prepare a bowl of cinnabar powder, and he takes out a thick pile of yellow paper talismans that have yet to be used. With his eyes closed, he begins drawing on the talismans. At first he would mess up a lot, but gradually he gets used to it, and it becomes a way of mental relaxation rather than just killing time. Exorcism talismans pile up in the corner of his desk.

Even from a great distance, one can feel warm and overflowing energy radiating from the talismans. Usually he would find the menial task hard to stand, and yet when he's with Shen Wei, he can't help but be influenced by him, and his heart inevitably settles down.

Zhu Hong knocks and comes in, and sees the two men who fit together like puzzle pieces spending time with each other so

independently and blissfully. She hesitates at the doorway. She feels like going inside is pointless, completely meaningless.

She bites her lip and nods coldly towards Shen Wei. Then she says to Zhao Yunlan, "I'm going out. The year-end bonus is here; I'm going to the bank for Wang Zheng."

Zhao Yunlan the penniless is instantly revitalised as he hears this, and nods hastily. "Uhuh, right, go."

Zhu Hong takes a form from a folder. "Also, this is our department's budget for this year's reunion dinner. Besides food, we need to buy offerings. I'll read it to you, sign if there's no problem. Then I'll get a loan from a moneylender."

Zhu Hong reads out every entry, and Zhao Yunlan sits and listens. The two quickly go through everything, and Zhao Yunlan signs on the paper. After they're finished, Zhu Hong looks at Shen Wei, and asks, stuttering, "So this year... this year are you still spending New Year with us?"

Zhao Yunlan doesn't look up. "Yeah, why wouldn't I?"

Joy emerges on Zhu Hong's face, but the next moment, she hears Zhao Yunlan say, "Not only me, I'm bringing family as well, am I right, wifey?"

Perhaps he has gotten used to the constant harassment and flirtation, or perhaps since Zhu Hong is here, Shen Wei doesn't overreact, and only smiles softly, and almost playfully chides him: "Go away."

Zhu Hong's face darkens instantly, and after a while, she says disheartedly, "Oh, I'll go if there's nothing else."

"Hey, wait." Zhao Yunlan calls her back. He tidies up the talismans on the desk, then opens the drawer and takes out a thick pile that he

drew before. He hands them to Zhu Hong. "There's a small shop on Antique Street, behind the big pagoda tree at the very end. There's no shop sign, and only an old man looking after the shop. Go inside and show these to the old man. Same price as always, he knows. But tell him that I drew these blind, so if there are defects, give him a discount."

Zhu Hong takes them, stuffs them into the pocket of her down jacket, and asks, surprised, "You're selling paper talismans?"

Zhao Yunlan smiles. "I have a family to feed, you know? I've gotta bring home some bacon. Just bought a house, now I urgently need some cash to make a few renovations."

Zhu Hong doesn't wait for him to finish, leaving without a word.

She was going to ask whether she should accompany him to the Tribes Market, but it seems that would be rather unnecessary now.

The door of the chief's office is violently slammed shut. Shen Wei raises his head from his antique book. "Does she have feelings for..."

"Uh." Zhao Yunlan takes a new yellow paper, and says while measuring with his fingers, "I didn't notice before. But now that I know, I better make her give up as soon as possible."

Shen Wei sighs.

"Why are you sighing?" Zhao Yunlan laughs soundlessly. "Can office romance ever amount to anything? Besides, I'm human and she's a shifter, we don't belong together."

Zhao Yunlan says that unintentionally, but Shen Wei has every intention to read into it. After a moment of silence, he says, "Then you and me... I'm a ghost and you're human, do we belong together?"

"Eh?" Zhao Yunlan dips into the cinnabar powder. Stunned, he realises he said something wrong, and immediately corrects himself. "How are you the same? I like you so much."

He says this so carelessly, curtailing the seriousness of it so that it doesn't even seem like deliberate sweet-talking, but merely... like casual chit-chat as you raise a cup to sniff the aroma of tea in a cosy, toasty room while winter storms are raging outside.

Suddenly, someone grabs Zhao Yunlan's hand on the talisman paper. His pen derails and the magic on the talisman is lost; the paper goes to waste.

Before Zhao Yunlan can realise, Shen Wei has leaned in very close and put his hands on the armrests of the chair, his arms bracketing Zhao Yunlan. He holds his breath and devotedly moves closer. With his eyes shut, eyelashes quivering, he heedfully kisses Zhao Yunlan's nose. A while later, he gathers the courage to slowly move downwards, testing the waters, one inch at a time, and finally landing on Zhao Yunlan's slightly dry lips.

So incredibly sensual, and so incredibly gentle. Even though he tenderly pries open Zhao Yunlan's lips and enters, it doesn't seem like he wants to do anything more.

It's just that the sensation of love overwhelms him, and he desires an intimate kiss.

To Shen Wei, that feeling is like a deadly toxin. Even though he struggles valiantly, all his efforts are in vain, and he inevitably falls deeper and deeper.

At this instant, someone comes in without knocking. After seeing something they're not supposed to see, they moan, and silently go back out.

Shen Wei is startled by the sound of the door and springs up, panicking. He coughs dryly, trying to conceal his embarrassment.

Da Qing scratches at the door, attempting to shrug off what just happened, but failing. He asks loudly with elongated words, "Chief? Chief comrade are you there? Are you busy?"

Zhao Yunlan is furious. "Just come in!"

Da Qing wiggles his butt inside and glances at Shen Wei. He finds this specimen very intriguing... he has never seen such a subtle and easily-embarrassed human being with Zhao Yunlan before. For a moment, strangely, Da Qing finds Shen Wei's expression looks rather like the prostitutes being arrested by the police on the news.

He's almost dying of embarrassment; a rush of blush spreads from his face to his neck.

Like this, he truly has the beauty of peach blossoms, and the aesthetics of a well-crafted portrait. No wonder the big gangster so persistently went after him for over half a year, and yet he still hasn't had his meal. Da Qing silently scrutinises Shen Wei with his cat eyes.

Then he wriggles his tail and merrily thinks: no matter how good-looking, the big gangster still doesn't get to see it.

The big gangster says impatiently, "Two minutes to say what you need to say, if you give me catshit I'm gonna skin you to make a fur collar!"

The black cat crouches on his desk. "I wrote to the Flower Tribe, you've received the invitation, right? You've got quite a lot of acquaintances among the shifters. After dusk, someone will be waiting for you at the western entrance of Antique Street. Just go in directly, but don't forget to bring gifts."

At this point, he looks at Shen Wei. "Professor Shen knows the rules, I assume?"

Shen Wei nods. "Don't worry, I'll take care of him."

Da Qing is relieved; he believes that if a human knows shame then he knows boundaries, and if he knows boundaries then he's reliable. Professor Shen seems so much more reliable.

Zhao Yunlan is about to send the guest away, when his phone suddenly rings. He feels around for his phone, muttering "Who's that now?" under his breath, and picks it up. From his perch on the desk, Da Qing is peeking at the phone screen. It reads: 'Empress'. Da Qing instantly feels refreshed, sits up straight, and waits for a hilarious show.

First, Zhao Yunlan says frivolously, "Hi, Chief Zhao of the SI..."

Then his voice abruptly stops, and he turns into a feeble kitten, speaking in a gentle and obedient tone, and says, "Aye, aye, I didn't see, it's my fault, mum."

A moment ago, Zhao Yunlan was just sitting in his comfortable swivel chair like a boss; such majesty and arrogance. And yet, after picking up the phone, he begins curling up into a ball, his tail between his legs like a eunuch following behind an emperor. Da Qing rolls across the desk, laughing quietly.

"No, I wouldn't dare to forget," Zhao Yunlan says. "I really have something to do tonight, really... ow, please don't ask, it's work... no, why would I fool around? Where would I go fooling around in this freezing weather?"

Shen Wei stands aside, and hears him talking to the other side with an intimate and affectionate tone. His gaze darkens. This time, it cannot be clearer to Shen Wei that Zhao Yunlan is a living, breathing

human of flesh and bones, and with parents, with countless ties in the living world. Zhao Yunlan is, after all, different from Shen Wei.

Since Zhao Yunlan finds this phone call rather detrimental to his image, he stands up, holding on to the chair, and slowly ambles out of the room.

Da Qing licks his paws and stares at Shen Wei. After a while, he asks, "Are you human?"

Shen Wei is lost for words.

Da Qing explains hastily, "Oh, I'm not scolding you. I meant that literally. Literal meaning, you understand, right? So... are you human, or, uh... something else, or whatever, you know?"

This question hits Shen Wei's sore spot. He stays silent for a while, then shakes his head.

But Da Qing seems quite relieved, and murmurs, "Not human, not human is good... uh, that kid looks like a jerk most of the time, but he's actually quite nice. He really likes you, don't hurt him."

Shen Wei replies with an incredibly soft and stately tone, enunciating one word after another, "As long as he still wants me, I will never let him down, whether in life or in death."

Da Qing stares into his eyes. He feels the indescribably deep affection and sincerity in the pitch-black gaze. It has been many, many years since he last saw such genuine feeling in someone; for a moment, he's mesmerised.

Then, Zhao Yunlan returns, his phone call finished. Da Qing comes to, dashes towards his legs and goes around them in circles, "What did the old lady say? I want to eat her fried yellow corvina!"

"Eat your ass. Go away, don't stick to me." Zhao Yunlan nudges him away with his leg.

Da Qing persists, clawing on to his trousers tightly. Following his movements, he's flung to and fro in the air like a round ball of fur, yelling with much energetic noise, "I want to eat... FRIED! YELLOW! CORVINA!!!"

"I'll take you along, okay, venerable old cat." Zhao Yunlan bends down and picks Da Qing up by the nape, hurling him aside. Then he slaps him on the butt. "We'll go for dinner on the first day of the New Year. My mum said, 'That cat has lived for so many years, it probably doesn't have much time left.' So she told me to treat you better."

Zhao Yunlan turns towards Shen Wei, "I told her to make dinner for one more. You free? Got other plans? Wanna come home with me?"

Shen Wei is stunned. He retrieves his voice after a long time. "I... I better not. It's the New Year, an outsider like me probably..."

"Outsider?" Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrow. "So what now, you've decided to dump me?"

Shen Wei is struck dumb.

Da Qing silently shakes his head and slips out through the door gap. Then he kicks the door shut skillfully with his rear legs. He feels like someone inside must have had his sense of decency eaten by a dog.

~~~

Needless to say, given what a gangster Zhao Yunlan can be, as night falls and they head to the Tribes Market, somehow he's got Shen Wei to agree.

The two arrive in Antique Street. Zhao Yunlan wears a pair of sunglasses and holds a walking stick that came out of nowhere. Shen Wei helps him walk with one hand, and in the other he holds a big lacquer box with four layers. The first layer contains lingzhi mushrooms and yulu tea leaves<sup>74</sup> picked from the mountains, the second layer contains antique golden and jade ritual instruments, the third layer contains precious pearls and dragon whiskers from the deep sea, and the fourth layer contains black gold and iron from the Underworld. With all the treasure inside, this box probably weighs a few hundred kilograms.

Antique Street does not in fact have a western entrance. Its western side is a dead end, and the handful of shops there have already closed early. There's only a big pagoda tree with a red paper lantern hanging from it. The mottled wall is lit by a glowing halo.

The two men walk below the lantern. With a flash of light before their eyes, a horseless carriage appears in front of them. A 'person' descends from the carriage, exceptionally tall and slender, wearing a strangely old-fashioned long gown. It has a fox face, like a furry mask when seen from a distance.

The fox hides its paws in the gown's long sleeves, its narrow and cunning eyes glaring at the box in Shen Wei's hand, and bows, "Welcome, my important guests, please come this way."

## Chapter 63

The Tribes Market is usually organised in different units, one unit per district, like the village markets in the past. Normally, it takes place annually, and in some units, it's bustling and lively, but there are also some that are relatively subdued.

The roads in Dragon City form an elaborate network of transportation, so congested with traffic that citizens get into roadside quarrels every day. The hustling and bustling crowds of pedestrians in the city are huge, as well. And yet, Dragon City's Tribes Market is the smallest in the area.

Even though the big city is densely populated with a mix of all kinds of people, and there's truth to the saying that 'legends lurk in the cities', it's in fact not an ideal place for shifter culture. Unless they have ties to the living, or have come all the way here to complete karma, most shifters wouldn't live here for their own sake.

Since Zhao Yunlan's SIU was established in Dragon City, countless shifters have been his informants, and there are many more he considers brothers. And yet, he has never been to the Tribes Market. It's basically the year-end reunion dinner of the shifter tribes, and no matter how close and informal he usually is with them, it wouldn't be appropriate for an outsider like him to ignore customs and join in the celebrations.

Come to think of it, this is the first time he has ever been invited to the Tribes Market.

Zhao Yunlan is sitting inside the steadily moving carriage, when his lips suddenly curve up into an unconcealable, strange smile.

Shen Wei asks, "What is it?"

Zhao Yunlan squeezes Shen Wei's hand, which has been holding onto him the whole time. Amidst the whirring of the wheels, he lowers his voice. "I think our relationship is developing quite traditionally. First we introduce ourselves and get to know each other, then we start holding hands, and now we're going out on dates. I feel like if we develop further, we'll soon get to the 'endgame'."

Shen Wei hastily glances outside the carriage door; he knows foxes have sharp ears. He lowers his voice and says to Zhao Yunlan, "Wait until we're back home tonight to say these things."

Zhao Yunlan says, "But how do I say it?"

Zhao Yunlan is met with silence.

He continues with an operatic tone, waggling his eyebrows exaggeratedly, "My good big brother, I want you so much, I can't stand it anymore, become mine."

Shen Wei flicks his hand away. After a while, he sees Zhao Yunlan's hand wandering aimlessly in mid-air and randomly touching everything. He hesitates, but then furtively grasps his hand again.

Nobody knows if the fox heard them, but the carriage has been speeding along steadily throughout. Around a quarter of an hour later, it stops; the fox lifts up the curtains and beckons the two to step outside. A chilling breeze rushes in. From somewhere in the vicinity, a rough duet of guqin and xiao<sup>75</sup> can be heard; the tune is melancholic, and yet the players seem to be awkwardly trying to create a joyous atmosphere with it, which makes it very strange to hear.

Two doormen with horse heads and human bodies are standing guard at either side of the entrance. A bit farther away, a man with a snake tail is waiting. This is one of the unspoken rules of the Tribes

Market: all shifters must reveal a part of themselves besides their human bodies, so that less experienced newcomers can recognise everyone, and no unhappy misunderstandings occur.

The snake shifter smiles at Zhao Yunlan. "Lord Guardian, you're here."

It's freezing cold during Winter, and following their natural instinct, snake shifters tend not to go outside once it's cold. They usually don't get involved in the festivities; all they do is send one or two tribe members to quickly show their faces and represent the whole variety of the Snake Tribe.

This snake shifter now emerging from the entrance has clearly been waiting for Zhao Yunlan in particular.

After listening attentively, Zhao Yunlan says politely, "My eyes are somewhat compromised today. I hope I didn't hear wrong, you must be Uncle Four?"

The snake man nods. "I'm honoured that you remember me, Lord Guardian. Come in; Zhu Hong told me everything. If you need anything, just tell me."

Shen Wei hands the lacquer box to a horse doorman and helps Zhao Yunlan inside.

Once they're inside, it's like walking in a pedestrian zone. On a length of about one hundred metres, there are two roads paved with flagstones on either side of a long and narrow river. A small stone bridge arches across the river, with tall tables set on the bridge. The two riverbanks are overcrowded, and decorated with bright lanterns and colourful banners. The pedestrians are mostly half-beast and half-human. Some shifters have set up stalls selling products to fellow shifters.



Snake Uncle Four walks ahead, leading the two all the way to the stone bridge.

There's still a thin layer of snow on the cold stone bridge, but the small stone pillar at one end of the bridge is wrapped in a single thin vine sprouting a few small, pale yellow flowers.

Uncle Four stands still and says to the flowers, "Miss Yingchun, the Guardian is here. Please come out to meet him."

As he says this, the lone shoot of winter jasmine suddenly bulks up and quickly spreads across this side of the bridge, covering the stones with a flower rug. Countless tiny buds blossom across the floor. Then, a young girl springs up from the vines; her upper body is that of a human, but her lower body is still connected to and virtually indistinguishable from the lush vegetation.

From her looks, she appears to be around fifteen. With a double bun hairstyle, and long and narrow eyes, she looks like a young girl. She looks at Zhao Yunlan, and then at Shen Wei.

For some reason, Yingchun seems to be rather frightened of Shen Wei. She only gives him a fleeting glance, then quickly looks back at Zhao Yunlan and giggles. "The black cat said the Guardian is very handsome. Why are you covering your face with such big sunglasses?"

Zhao Yunlan takes off the sunglasses and hangs them at his collar. "To attract sympathy. Little girl, when you see a handsome guy like me, but find out I'm blind, you might want to give me more honey."

Yingchun laughs, and then looks at his eyes closely. She frowns, and asks Uncle Four, "What's with the crows? Why are they hurting humans for no reason?"

Uncle Four pats her on the head, looks down, and says nothing.

Yingchun glances around. "The Crow Tribe didn't send anyone this year?"

"Not only here, but to none of the markets in other areas, either," Uncle Four says. "You don't need to bother with this; focus on your cultivation and grow some beautiful blossoms when spring comes."

Yingchun murmurs, a little upset. She takes out a small bottle, reaches for Zhao Yunlan's hand, and places the bottle in Zhao Yunlan's palm. "Our leader told me to give this to you. He also said that if you need anything in the future, Lord Guardian, just tell him, we're all willing to listen to your commands."

Zhao Yunlan is stunned. "My commands? No, no, no, your leader is way too kind..."

His voice is drowned out as a small monkey jumps onto the tables on the bridge out of nowhere, and heavily clangs two copper gongs together.

The shifters immediately quiet down, and many stone tables are brought out along the street. Yingchun goes, "Oh, the dinner is going to start, I have to perform. Esteemed Guardian, that's all I can say for now, please excuse me. Take care!"

"Wait..."

Before Zhao Yunlan can continue, Yingchun transforms into a sweep of flowering vines, and swiftly covers all the tables on the stone bridge. Each and every post of the railing is wrapped completely in vines, and the small platform on the stone bridge shines brightly in resplendent exuberance.

Zhao Yunlan has yet to retrieve his hand from his pocket. In his pocket is a small linen pouch, given to him by Da Qing, who claims that it's from the former Guardian... and so it seems it must be a treasure from his former life, or the former life of his former life, going

back who knows how far. It's a small jade cup with patterns of moonflowers engraved on it, intricate and enchanting. It is said that the cup can preserve moonlight; for the cultivation of flower shifters it would be a priceless item.

Zhao Yunlan intended to exchange this for the Thousand Flower honey. He never thought she would just hand him the honey without a price, like an offering to a deity.

The Flower Tribe's attitude towards him, so different from the black crows who attacked him, makes Zhao Yunlan think of the possible implications. He ponders, turns around to ask Shen Wei to leave, and inadvertently bumps into a corner of a stone table.

Shen Wei holds on to his waist, embracing him and blocking the sneaky glances of several shifters peeking towards them curiously. He says to Uncle Four, "We have what we came for. Since this is the tribes' dinner gathering after all, we outsiders will see ourselves out. We really wouldn't want to bother you."

Uncle Four catches a glimpse of his possessive gestures, and says with dignity, "They've already set tables for you; you're our guests of honour. Please stay for a few drinks before you leave, do you mind?"

Shen Wei frowns.

Uncle Four says, "Next year is our tribe's year... the Year of the Snake. I'll be hosting tonight's activities, please excuse me."

Before Shen Wei can refuse, he steadily mounts the small platform with his long snake tail trailing behind and his long sleeves almost sweeping the floor. Music begins again, but not an eerie duet anymore; this time they're playing ritual songs from ancient times.

From afar, a bright female voice sings, *"Lives of Heav'n and Earth, born from Mount Buzhou."*

All shifters solemnly fall silent. Uncle Four arranges his sleeves<sup>76</sup>, drops his gaze, and bows respectfully. He begins speaking with a deep and resonant voice, "The old fades, the new nears. 'Tis year-end; all tribes bow to the Three Great Ones. Bow to the Primordial God of the Mountains. Bow to our Great Ancestors..."

The shifters all stand up and silently bow towards the northwest.

The female voice continues to chant with elongated tones.

*"Lands of primal times, hills in form unjoined. Peaks abreast of clouds, pillars of the skies. Son of God of Fire, King of all the Seas. Touch with dragons called, stars shall turn the time..."*

Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrows in astonishment, and whispers to Shen Wei, "Who is she singing about? Sounds like Gonggong, the God of Water."

Shen Wei is still frowning, and his face darkens further by the minute. He hears his question, and nods. "Uh, yes, it's him."

Zhao Yunlan continues, "Is it the part where Gonggong knocked down Mount Buzhou?"

Shen Wei confirms briefly once again.

Zhao Yunlan asks again, "But isn't Gonggong the God of Water? Who is this Primordial God of the Mountains? The mountain god of Mount Buzhou?"

This time, Shen Wei is silent for a while, and then replies vaguely, "Uh... perhaps? I'm not too sure what happened back then."

Zhao Yunlan seems to have picked up something in his tone of voice, and he stops asking questions. With his finger to his palm, he taps along to the rhythm of the song.

The shifter's song is long-winded, telling of the battle between Zhuangzi and Gonggong, and how Gonggong made Mount Buzhou collapse out of rage.

Legend says because of how inconsiderate Gonggong was, the world began to have the order of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. This story seems to be greatly connected with how the shifter tribes came into being, and yet what exactly the connection is, the lyrics don't tell explicitly.

Many tales of history are incomplete, and all that can be deduced from bits and pieces of information is that there's more than meets the eye. Not to mention that they stem from the dawn of time, telling of far-from-accurate legends and myths of gods. Zhao Yunlan knows that he really shouldn't get bogged down in some age-old lyrics, and yet he can't help himself. It's as if a voice in his heart is telling him that these stories, which appear insignificant and irrelevant, in fact hold some profound meaning.

It's unheard of that primeval deities have two functions at the same time. If Gonggong is already the God of Water, then he cannot be the Primordial God of the Mountains that the shifter tribes worship right after the Three Great Ones.

Which chief of which mountain village made history as a godly figure?

Zhao Yunlan's fingers twitch. He suddenly recalls what the crow shifter said. A word emerges in his mind... 'Kunlun'.

After a very long time, the tribes finish their worshipping. Beautiful female shifters rush back and forth, pouring tea and wine and serving dishes. The tribes' reunion dinner has officially begun.

Shen Wei uses driving as an excuse to reject the wine. He watches Zhao Yunlan drink a cup before he urges, "We should leave."

Zhao Yunlan nods, and is about to stand up.

He hears a commotion from within the crowds of shifters.

Zhao Yunlan listens intently. "What's wrong?"

Shen Wei looks at the high platform. "The snake has pushed a half-shifter on stage. The thing is oozing black smoke and reeking of blood. Probably did a lot of terrible things. To avoid punishment from the Heavens affecting innocent shifters, they'll execute him. It's an old tradition."

If Guo Changcheng were here, he would recognise that this is the same guy he almost ran over before.

Zhao Yunlan listens but soon realises that it's an internal matter of the tribes, and so he loses interest. While Uncle Four is reciting numerous charges, Zhao Yunlan has Shen Wei hold on to his arm and help him walk outside.

As they're about to leave, Uncle Four is done reading the charges. He announces, "The Half-shifter of the Crow Tribe has veered from the righteous path. Many people he has harmed, and the Laws of the Heavens he has breached. This is a shame for our kind. Now I shall rid our kind of outlaws, and exercise justice for the Heavens..."

The words 'Crow Tribe' make Zhao Yunlan and Shen Wei stop mid-step.

Simultaneously, a voice interrupts Uncle Four. "Wait!"

The voice is incredibly coarse, with a hint of unspeakable ill omen.

Shen Wei shoves Zhao Yunlan behind him, and his gaze shoots icicles. At the entrance of the Tribes Market stand a row of black and hideous figures, all wearing wings and covered in pitch-black feathers.

It's the Crow Tribe.

## Chapter 64

Zhao Yunlan grips Shen Wei by the wrist. Though he's blind, he can still feel the malevolence emanating from the intruders, so frigid that it pierces bone-deep.

He hears Shen Wei's voice, no longer as gentle as always, but deep and indescribably horrifying. Shen Wei says, "How dare the crows harm you? Those ungrateful creatures! I shall cut them to pieces and obliterate their kind!"

The last few words are overflowing with bloodthirst. Zhao Yunlan doesn't hesitate and holds him back, but Shen Wei instinctively struggles out of his embrace.

For some reason, at that moment, something dawns on Zhao Yunlan's mind, and he says without thinking, "Xiao Wei!"

Shen Wei freezes. After a long pause, he asks with a quivering voice, "What... what did you just call me?"

"Shhh, listen to me, don't move." Zhao Yunlan closes his eyes, and opens his third eye, which is a little blurry under the influence of the Tribes Market. He pulls Shen Wei back and the two hide in the crowd of shifters.

Shen Wei is utterly flustered. He didn't check his words, and Zhao Yunlan has instantly grasped the tiniest hint... what did he mean by 'ungrateful'? Shen Wei and the Crow Tribe... no, Shen Wei and all the shifters, what is their connection?

Zhao Yunlan recalls something he heard a long, long time ago: 'Crows foretell calamities.'

What does the Crow Tribe foretell?



From the stage, Uncle Four nods towards the crows with reserve, and says calmly, his tone not changing at all, "And I thought the crows were not coming this year."

The leader of the Crow Tribe is a woman, but in this tribe, apart from the half-shifters, all members are of small stature, with big noses and wrinkled faces. One simply cannot tell whether they're young or old, pretty or ugly.

Her eyes are slanted and it's hard to tell whether she's impassively looking at Zhao Yunlan or simply glancing in his general direction. Her dark eyes sparkle with a subtle light. Then, she slams the end of her sceptre on the ground, and as she lifts up her hand, the tied-up half-shifter is instantly freed from its bonds. The crow elder lowers her voice. "Child, come here."

Uncle Four hides his hands inside the sleeves and disregards this action, with no intention of stopping it. Murmurs spring up from all corners of the Tribes Market.

When the half-shifter stumbles forward, just before he reaches the end of the platform, Uncle Four says, "If the elder wants to take one of their own, I have nothing to say. But does this mean the Crow Tribe wish to leave the other tribes and stand alone?"

The crow elder says with a coarse voice, "Yes!"

That word is met with complete silence. The shifters look around in confusion; Yingchun sticks her head out from the flowers and helplessly looks here and there.

Uncle Four looks at her with a bland expression. "Crows, you can eat all the carrion you want, and be as close to death as you can. And yet you're still shifters, not Underworld messengers, and not immortals. The words are out of your mouth, elder, and there's no turning back, think carefully."

The crow elder suddenly bursts into bellowing laughter. Her voice is rough and thick; one cannot tell whether she's content or agitated, but there's a strong impression of ancient indignation and ridicule. She says with dignity, enunciating every single word, "If you didn't hear me the first time, I'll say it again... We the Crow Tribe shall no longer be part of the tribes. We shall form our own clan, and we'll never turn back. If we go back on this oath, let Heavenly Lightning strike us down in punishment!"

She waves her hand, and the pitch-black crows are gone as fast as they appeared.

In just a few moments, like thunder and lightning, everything has been decided. The other shifters haven't even had time to react to what has happened.

Murmurs and whispers turn into hectic commotion. Nobody knows what to think of this.

Uncle Four waves his hand, and the little monkey beside him starts banging his gongs to call the crowd to order. Amidst the chaos, Zhao Yunlan pulls Shen Wei along and the two head swiftly down the paved road for the gate, where a giant cloud of fog has formed.

Beyond the fog are the neon-lit streets of Dragon City. Everything looks hazy that night.

A flock of pitch-black crows land on the giant pagoda tree outside Antique Street. A taxi swiftly passes by, and the talkative driver says to his passenger, "Look, mister, even crows are celebrating the New Year!"

A black cat silently emerges from a corner, its paws padding across the ground lightly, and it agilely mounts a wall. Dozens of crows turn towards it simultaneously; a row of blood-red eyes glow like ominous lightbulbs.

Da Qing stops at a distance and doesn't walk forward, showing that he's no threat.

The crow elder steps forward into the shadows where she cannot be seen, and says impolitely with a coarse voice, "What do you want?"

The black cat holds still; his emerald eyes sparkle with a subdued glow, like two Cat's Eye gemstones, tilting slightly upwards. The sloth and elegance unique to felines manifest perfectly; for a moment, one almost forgets about how he's a laughably plump ball of fur.

"I have a bold request," Da Qing says politely. "I would like to ask the elder: how did the bell I lost a few centuries ago end up with your tribe?"

The crow elder scrutinises the cat and says coldly, "What a foolish question. Our tribe tells of calamity, not of prosperity; we're close to the dead, not the living. How did it end up with us? From a dead person of course."

Da Qing's body tenses up for an instant.

A while later, the black cat asks, "When and where, and how did the person die?"

The crow elder lets out a screeching cackle. "A dead person is a dead person. Their former life is no more. Once reincarnated, in the next life they could be a pig or a dog. Why do you care when and where they died?"

Da Qing, head drooping, says nothing for a long while.

The crow elder looks at the cat again, and after a while, she says impatiently, "A pavilion twenty miles outside Shanhai Pass. Go there and see for yourself, if you want. I wouldn't lie about this. Wearing a bell from a dead man... I see that you don't mind bad fortune."

She whistles, and the whole huge flight of crows soars up into the sky, vanishing into the jet-black horizon.

Da Qing lowers his head in the darkness. He stands in place for a while, suddenly looking like a desolate stray cat.

Then the headlamps of a car flash by, and he leaps off the wall silently, disappearing into the night.

~~~

In a blink of the Torch Dragon's eyes, a night has passed. It's now New Year's Eve.

The night before New Year, the SIU office is brightly lit. Humans are feasting on lavish meals and ghosts on incense.

Lao Wu finally gets the chance to meet with his daytime colleague who likes carving bones; he merrily raises a stick of burning incense in a toast to him. Of course, the other returns the toast with wine in a bone china cup. Lao Li seems to have some kind of morbid fascination with bones.

Later that night, the bells have rung, announcing the New Year, and the drunken men and ghosts are starting to go slightly insane. Guo Changcheng is lying on the table, weeping copiously for no apparent reason. After he has stopped crying, he sits in a corner all by himself. He carefully takes out a piece of lens cloth and begins wiping his staff card endlessly. He keeps wiping and wiping until he rolls under the table, where he finally falls asleep.

Chu Shuzhi, Lin Jing, Zhu Hong, and Da Qing have set up a mahjong game. The gambling chips will magically turn into small dried fish when they're put on the cat's side of the table. Da Qing wears a stern expression... he has no choice but to keep winning, since he has eaten up almost all his chips.

Lao Li takes out a giant bone out of nowhere and starts pole dancing with it. Sang Zan pulls Wang Zheng into an embrace and lifts her high by the waist. Wang Zheng giggles and starts humming an ancient tune, and they dance the choreography of the Hanga people.

Luckily, No. 4 Bright Avenue is locked behind closed doors; normal people cannot come in.

Zhao Yunlan has been drinking a lot tonight, and he can't quite sit up straight anymore. His eyes can see a little now, but everything is still very blurry, as if he were severely short-sighted. Although he can't tell six dots from nine dots, he squints his eyes persistently, pushing his face close to the table, and says from behind Da Qing, arms frantically waving in the air, "Pong! Pong! Pong!!!"⁷⁷

Da Qing paws him away. "Pong your mother! Professor Shen, take that talkative donkey away... four bamboos!"

Zhu Hong says, "Sorry, I win."

Zhao Yunlan hits Da Qing on the head, angered at the cat's misfortune. "See, ignore what your elders say, then it's you who's going to pay!"

Da Qing watches his dried fish being taken away and turned into chips and roars furiously, "Take him away!"

Shen Wei comes over with a smile and bends down to Zhao Yunlan, gently pulling him up. Be it a tall man or a few-hundred-kilo lacquer box, he picks up almost anything as if it weighed no more than a thin manuscript.

Zhu Hong looks down and intentionally avoids eye contact.

Shen Wei sits on the couch and makes Zhao Yunlan lie down so his head is resting in his lap. He tenderly massages his temples and

says with a low voice, "Close your eyes. They haven't recovered fully. Don't try to see just yet, it'll wear you out."

Zhao Yunlan closes his eyes in incredible bliss, and mumbles, "Pour me some warm wine."

Shen Wei is apparently not paying attention; he doesn't hear him.

Zhao Yunlan opens his eyes, and watches Shen Wei with his blurry eyesight. He finds that Shen Wei is staring at a corner of the table, lost in thought.

Zhao Yunlan's quick mind instantly understands and pulls on Shen Wei's collar gently. He whispers, "What's up, are you nervous about meeting my parents?"

Shen Wei comes back to the present and runs a hand through his hair. Well-tempered as usual, he only says softly, "All parents want their children to have peaceful lives, marry well and have children, and build a beautiful family. If you just bring me there so recklessly, and they can't even enjoy New Year peacefully, isn't it too..."

Zhao Yunlan grabs for his hand and shuts his eyes... Now that his eyesight is coming back, it's interfering with his third eye, and he can no longer see people's virtue. And yet, he still remembers the words on Shen Wei being washed away by darkness like the never-ending tides.

Zhao Yunlan asks with rare seriousness, "If I don't bring you along, where will you spend the New Year?"

"Whether I celebrate New Year or not doesn't really matter..."

"You'll return Downstairs?" Zhao Yunlan interrupts him. "To the Underworld? Where not a single beam of light shines, and only the occasional stupid ghost comes wandering by?"

No, it's even worse down there.

Shen Wei never thought anything bad about this kind of life. But for some reason, now that Zhao Yunlan mentions it, he suddenly feels that he has been missing out. The lifestyle that he'd gotten so used to now seems unthinkable, even impossible, to endure.

But after a long silence, Shen Wei only says blandly, "It's alright, I can handle it."

From the birth of all living things in primordial times until now, the world has transformed countless times; and yet he still clings to the vow he swore to someone who no longer remembers. It's as if his entire life has been about those very words and nothing more.

Zhao Yunlan speaks no more. He holds Shen Wei's hand against his heart. His heartbeat is racing a bit, probably because of the alcohol. Long after, when Shen Wei almost thinks he's asleep, Zhao Yunlan asks with a lowered voice, "Wei... why this name?"

"At first it was 'Wei', as in 'mountain ghost'.⁷⁸" Shen Wei looks down, his dark irises gazing through the polished floor, looking into the distant past. "But someone said to me: 'Although 'mountain ghost' is quite fitting, it's perhaps a little lacking. The seas and mountains of this world conjoin in a splendid nexus, and countless majestic hills extend to the horizon and beyond.' He suggested that I add a few more strokes, and gave me a grander name."⁷⁹

Zhao Yunlan rubs his nose - he finds that person's choice of words oddly familiar. "Who was this egomaniac? Who gave him the right to change other people's names?"

Shen Wei smiles. "Just someone I met by chance."

They stop chatting, dawn arrives, and the entire avenue is filled with the cacophony of blasting firecrackers. The Mahjong players are

making an uproar. Small ghosts sprint off into the shadows to hide from the morning sun.

The New Year is so vibrant and hectic, it can blind one's eyes.

The curtain opens on a light touch of snowfall on New Year in Dragon City. Peace and quiet bless the bounds of the Earth; flamboyant lanterns are put out to welcome the first sunrise.

The first breath of air, mixed with the flavour of timely snow and the scent of gunpowder, reaches the nostrils of numerous people from numerous families. Another year, another multitude of joys and sorrows for the living.

Chapter 65

Close to noon on the first day of the New Year, the devilish chaos at No. 4 Bright Avenue has finally subsided, and the intoxicated crowd grab their coats and queue up at the doorway to wait for taxis.

After everyone has left, Lao Li washes his face, grabs some cleaning equipment out of nowhere, and begins cleaning up the giant mess in the office.

Da Qing heads inside, and seeing the room in utter shambles cautiously holds his paws.

Lao Li whips out a towel and wipes the chairs clean, then proceeds to line them up. He lifts Master Cat onto a chair with reverence. "Walk up here where it's clean."

"They left you here all on your own again. Youngsters these days, so inconsiderate." Da Qing mumbles with conceited sagacity. He carefully bounces across the chairs onto the desk.

"Not just me, there's still someone else." Lao Li points towards a corner, and Da Qing sees Guo Changcheng crawl up.

"Oh, perfect. Hey kiddo, come here, I was looking for you." Da Qing glares at Guo Changcheng when he sees a coaster lying on Zhu Hong's desk and paws it away. Under the coaster, there's a red envelope with a few gift vouchers inside. He picks up the red envelope with his mouth and hurls it towards Guo Changcheng. "Chief Zhao wants you to take this to your uncle. He said he won't disturb the Director's New Year holiday, so help him pass this gift, maybe buy some new clothes for his wife and children... humph, stupid humans, these kinds of words are sure to disgust a cat."

Guo Changcheng is a bit slow on the uptake: he stands in place, dizzy and only half-conscious, before he finally remembers where he is. He cautiously picks up the red envelope and puts it away, smiling sluggishly. He turns around and sees Lao Li smiling at them, holding a mop. He immediately rolls up his sleeves and walks forward. "Lao Li! Let me help you, let me..."

But he trips on the leg of a chair and falls flat onto the floor.

Da Qing humphs and sits upright in front of the computer. He turns it on, clumsily using his cat paws to move the mouse, and opens a web browser.

Lao Li sees that and walks up enthusiastically, "What do you want to type? I'll help you."

Da Qing carelessly says, "Shanghai..."

"Hai" comes out of his mouth, but Da Qing quickly changes its tone so it almost sounds like "he"⁸⁰. Da Qing shuts up, stares expressionlessly at the monitor, and then looks down. "Oh, I mean I want to go on Weibo."

Zhao Yunlan said he went to handle some 'big deal', he'll come back to pick him up later. Da Qing meanwhile sits behind the computer, opens his Weibo account 'No. 1 Master Cat in the World', and begins posting selfies out of boredom.

Lao Li and Xiao Guo quietly clean up the chaos. A minute ago, Da Qing really wanted to find out about the pavilion twenty miles outside Shanhai Pass.

But the crow elder was right. So what if Da Qing finds out? A dead person is dead; all come from dust, and to dust all shall return.

With a click, Da Qing posts his fat pancake face to the web, with the description: 'World's Handsomest Cat'. In no time, many cat lovers

have left comments; some praising the cat for its pure-bred fur, others kindly suggesting: "OP, your cat might be too fat. Be careful of what it eats, and remember to make it exercise to keep it healthy."

Da Qing deletes that comment at the speed of light. He thinks angrily, "Stupid humans."

The bell around the cat's neck swings with his movements, but doesn't ring; only the occasional ray of golden light reflects onto the snow-white walls.

Lao Li can't help but shield his eyes from the blinding light. He turns around and looks at the unusually irritable black cat, and is about to say something. Suddenly, Chu Shuzhi rushes out of the wall. It seems that the first day of the New Year is the only time when he's allowed in the library. And yet, he doesn't look like he borrowed any books or read anything. He wears an incredibly bizarre expression: mocking, yet somehow subconsciously wretched at the same time.

Guo Changcheng instantly straightens up to greet him. "Chu-ge!"

Chu Shuzhi doesn't seem to hear. He heads for his bag, lips slowly curving upwards into what can almost be described as a smirk marked with grief and suffering. Then, he heads outside.

Da Qing peeks out from behind the computer, and asks cryptically, "How many years?"

Chu Shuzhi stops walking and says almost inaudibly, "Exactly three hundred."

"Ah," Da Qing says, "well then... uh, congratulations, I guess?"

After he says this, Chu Shuzhi suddenly pulls a small black wooden board from his pocket. He doesn't turn around, just holds up the board and shakes it in the cat's face. Perhaps it's Guo Changcheng's imagination, but a flash of writing seems to appear on Chu Shuzhi's

face, right on his cheeks, like the engraved words used to mark criminals in ancient times.

Da Qing's ears perk up and his eyes widen.

Chu Shuzhi's hand is turning pale green around the wooden board in his crushing grip. Veins are popping up on the back of his hand, radiating ferocity.

Without another word, he heads out with hasty steps. Da Qing instantly turns towards Guo Changcheng. "Xiao Guo, call a taxi for Chu Shuzhi!"

Guo Changcheng reacts sluggishly as usual, and Da Qing continues more forcefully, "He's drunk, go home with him and make sure he's alright before you come back, do you hear me?"

Guo Changcheng rapidly takes out a napkin and wipes his hands, then sprints outside and helps Chu Shuzhi carry his bag. Chu Shuzhi is acting like he lost his soul; when Guo Changcheng takes away his bag, he shows no reaction at all.

From behind, his figure is incredibly slender. For one moment, he appears to be nothing but skin and bones.

~~~

Just as Shen Wei is carrying the drunk-as-mud Zhao Yunlan home, the dean of the university suddenly calls. He's a plump good-for-nothing who only knows flattery. Apparently, he needs a document urgently.

Shen Wei finds this very odd. Before he can ask further, the dean mumbles something incoherent, sounding like someone has lit a fire under his ass, and hangs up hastily.

Shen Wei has no other choice, so he brings Zhao Yunlan, who's still clinging to him and refusing to let go, to his tiny, cold, and rarely used apartment.

As he steps inside, the dean insistently calls him again, urging him to send the document to the west gate of Dragon City University.

Shen Wei drops Zhao Yunlan onto the sofa. Zhao Yunlan rolls over and opens his eyes slightly, coming half-awake, "It's the first day of New Year, is that fat guy out of his mind?"

Shen Wei searches for his stuff, while sparing a hand to save Zhao Yunlan's head from banging against the coffee table. He puts a pillow under his head. "I have to go, I'll be back soon, you..."

"I need sleep." Zhao Yunlan's voice sinks down, just like his eyelids.

Shen Wei asks, "Want some water?"

"Nah..." Zhao Yunlan turns his head away to the side and gently swats at his hand. "No water."

His eyes glisten with a watery light, cherry lips soft and fine. His long eyebrows curve up, almost hidden underneath his hair. His head is tilted a little, extending his neck, and his chin is marked with a distinctive outline. The shirt with its top buttons undone reveals his slim and long neck, somehow both casual and charismatic.

Shen Wei's breath hitches, and he carefully brushes his fringe away. He covers him with a blanket, thumb tenderly lingering over Zhao Yunlan's lips, caressing him affectionately. He leans forward to kiss him on the forehead, then grabs the documents for the dean and his car keys and heads out.

A moment later, Zhao Yunlan hears the door close.

Zhao Yunlan instantly springs up like a zombie, though he was still intoxicated and disoriented just a few moments ago. He takes out his phone and sends a message: "Hold him for longer," and then he phones the moving company he contacted before.

The young man from the moving company has never received such a ludicrous order before. He hesitates. "Then... if the owner isn't here, should we..."

"There's no 'should', I want everything moved today," Zhao Yunlan says bossily. "Sooner or later I'll add his name to my household register, you think I'll write two addresses in the same booklet? I'm pissed whenever I see all his disposables. Get your ass here in five minutes, do you hear me?"

Zhao Yunlan hangs up and pulls a big pile of memo notes out of his bag. He starts rapidly making a list of what to move and what to throw away and buy again later.

Suddenly, the tip of Zhao Yunlan's pen stops moving, and an extremely lecherous thought sprouts in his mind... He absurdly begins to ponder: wherever might Shen Wei's underwear be? Especially the ones he has worn... Although recently Shen Wei has been forced to stay at Zhao Yunlan's tiny apartment, half-reluctantly, he has managed to mind his manners in matters of the heart even in its cramped space.

Besides, Zhao Yunlan has been blind for more than half a month. Although he never stopped trying to actualise his perverted plots, he was sadly limited by the confines of his physical capabilities. He's been living under the same roof with the man he loves every day, and yet it was not for him to see or eat, only to imagine... Gradually, he found himself living very much like a monk.

"I really have no other choice, you see." Zhao Yunlan rubs his hands, snickering to himself, and steps out onto the balcony. Perhaps it really has been a long time since Shen Wei stayed here; the clothes

hangers are still on the balcony, but nothing is hung. Zhao Yunlan doesn't give up and proceeds to open the big wardrobe in the living room. Yet he only finds a few shirts, trousers and coats, and a few pairs of shoes that look basically the same; there isn't even a pair of socks.

Zhao Yunlan's eyesight is still recovering, and he doesn't see the small box covered by a long trench coat. He adds 'clothes' to both the 'move' and 'buy' lists. Still not willing to give up, he comes to gaze on the eternally-shut door of Shen Wei's bedroom, which seems to contain an otherworldly dimension.

The door doesn't have a handle, nor is it overtly locked. Zhao Yunlan takes out a small hand torch, flashing it around through the gap and the shaft of the door. He doesn't find a pivot, nor does he find a hidden lock.

He finds this oddly suspicious. When he puts his palms on the door, his third eye perceives subtle markings; the black door seems to contain some kind of flowing energy. It flows in a steady path, utterly calm and sedate, every strand tightly fitted together, all interwoven impeccably.

Zhao Yunlan keeps his hands on the door for a while, when all of a sudden, it feels familiar. Soon, he remembers. "Kunlun lock?"

These few days, behind everyone's back, he has been asking Sang Zan for help in researching Kunlun. But besides the fact that it's a really awesome and really ancient mountain, and that there are some strange techniques named after Kunlun, he hasn't been able to find out anything useful.

He accidentally came across a description of the Kunlun lock when he was browsing books with his third eye.

It is said that the Kunlun lock is round at the top and square at the bottom, symbolising the four pillars of earth under a curved sky.

There are fourteen pins in the middle, representing the eight direction points of the compass and the six direction coordinates<sup>81</sup>.

At that time, the sixty-four hexagrams system<sup>82</sup> hadn't been developed yet. The Kunlun lock is only based on Yin and Yang, and is therefore not as convoluted as succeeding lock structures. Yet, on some level, it's in fact more eccentric and capricious, and difficult to grasp.

What would require a Kunlun lock to protect?

No... what is the relationship between the Ghost Slayer and Kunlun? Why does Shen Wei know about this ancient seal?

Zhao Yunlan stands at the door for a while, his mind filled with uncertainty. Then, he gathers spiritual energy at his palm and tries moving the Kunlun lock. The lock instantly activates, all fourteen pins starting to move in succession according to the order of Yin and Yang. It's difficult to keep track of the constant motion. Zhao Yunlan's knowledge is extensive: he has a general understanding of many things, but not to the point of being an expert. He's reckless and his imagination runs wild sometimes<sup>83</sup>, therefore he's nowhere near as apt in dealing with such intricate structures as Chu Shuzhi.

However, now Zhao Yunlan is faced with the Kunlun lock, for some unknown reason, a sense of familiarity wells up inside of him. He sees every change and every motion, and the shifting lock seems to be in sync with a particular rhythm ready to launch from within his heart.

Zhao Yunlan's fingers rapidly run across the door, as if someone were guiding them.

Sky door, earth joint, round square, along thirty-six columns, until...

*Kachunk!*



The pitch-black door slowly opens a small gap. There isn't a single ray of light inside. Zhao Yunlan stands at the doorway, suddenly hesitant.

For some reason, he regrets opening this door.

But after a moment of hesitation, he unclips a miniature torch from his key chain and cautiously enters the room.

The walls are hung with something, and Zhao Yunlan strains his eyes, squinting in the low light, when he's suddenly petrified.

Covering every wall, some large, some small, some angry, some laughing, all are... Zhao Yunlan's hand trembles and the torch almost drops to the ground. The rest of his intoxication quickly wears away.

After a while, the torch light slowly wanders towards an antique painting on the western wall. It's gigantic, almost taking up the entire wall, and it's made from some unknown material: as light and delicate as cicada wings, and as smooth and clear as snow. It's a portrait of a man.

The man is painted with fine and detailed eyes and brows; his presence vivid as to almost coming to life, with long hair falling down all the way to the ground, and wearing a long and very plain turquoise gown. His head is slightly tilted, and he appears to be wearing the hint of a smile... Zhao Yunlan feels like he's looking into a mirror.

On the side of the painting, there's a line of small words. They aren't written in simplified or traditional Chinese; in fact, not in any script that he's familiar with. Even though he has never seen these characters before, for some reason, he immediately understands their meaning:

*In the shade of the woods I first saw Kunlun-jun;  
a glimpse of his grace wrought chaos in my heart's song.*

*Wei*

Ten minutes later, the young man from the moving company arrives and knocks on the door. A strange man comes out of the apartment.

He doesn't explain anything at all. All he says is that there's no need to move anything. He pulls out his wallet and pays them the whole moving fee, apologising for having troubled them for nothing.

## Chapter 66

When Shen Wei meets the dean, he immediately realises that someone intentionally lured him away. His expression darkens. When the dean turns away from him, Shen Wei gives his shoulder a forceful tap, and asks coldly, "Who told you to call me?"

The force of his voice instantly intimidates the dean, weighing down on him until he's unable to move. His gaze loses focus and he blankly stares ahead, disoriented, like a shell without a soul.

Shen Wei tightens his grasp, turns the dean around, and shouts, "Tell me!"

No one can lie deliberately in the face of the Ghost Slayer, who judges all good and evil. And yet, the dean's expression gets more and more confused; he can't speak a word. Shen Wei's heart sinks; he knows that this human's memory has been messed with.

Shen Wei lets go of him and leaves without looking back.

The dean regains consciousness, and watches with bewilderment as Professor Shen leaves hurriedly. Luckily, Shen Wei didn't think to check his electronic devices; Shen Wei never uses those things, and he would never think along those lines when it comes down to it... not to mention, anyone who dares go against him wouldn't use these human gadgets anyway.

Of course, with his gentlemanly mind, he'd never imagine that someone would go to so much trouble and come up with a meticulous plan just to move his things and steal a few pieces of underwear.

Shen Wei hurries back to his apartment and bursts inside. The living room is empty. His heart almost freezes solid.

He stands stupefied at the door, and suddenly the need to kill rises up in him again, like a huge dragon that has been in deep slumber for aeons suddenly roused by someone rubbing its scales the wrong way. Shen Wei may look fine on the surface, but ever since his carelessness resulted in Zhao Yunlan's eye injury, he has been on edge and strung dangerously high.

The emptiness of the living room almost makes him snap – but luckily, that's when he hears a voice from the balcony. Shen Wei comes to his senses just in time, and his figure flashes and instantly reappears on the balcony.

He sees Zhao Yunlan lying comfortably on the window sill, smoking lazily, and yelling at the phone. "No, not the ones made of stone, I know... white marble? The heck! I'm not decorating a fucking palace. Don't be like that, Lao Wu, don't give me this nonsense... no, no, no, you listen to me, do your job nicely, and I'll pay you an extra bonus. I won't give you a penny less than you deserve, alright? But I'm telling you, if you mess with me you're gonna be in deep shit..."

Shen Wei heaves a sigh of relief, steadying himself against the balcony door. Now he realises that he's soaked in cold sweat, and even his palms are cold.

When Zhao Yunlan hears the noise, he turns and smiles. He says to the other end, "All right, all right, let's not argue about unimportant things, I want eco-friendly materials, ok? ...what do you mean, 'Copenhagen'<sup>85</sup>? I have to live there, just don't saddle me with anything steeped in weapons-grade chemicals, otherwise the smell won't go away for centuries. Oh, my wife just got home, I can't keep chatting with you, bye bye."

He hangs up, puts out the cigarette, and leans against the wide-open windows amidst the chilling winds. He opens his arms in his scruffy shirt, and says in a come-hither tone, "Baby come here and give your hubby a hug."

Teasing Shen Wei has become a habit of his, but this time Shen Wei really comes forward and embraces him, burying his face into his shoulder. Then he picks Zhao Yunlan up by the waist, lifts him off the window sill, and closes the window. He touches Zhao Yunlan's icy hands, and frowns. "Are you a silly child? Don't you realise it's cold?"

Zhao Yunlan, the silly child, places his hands onto the window sill and traps Shen Wei between his arms. He stretches sluggishly and lazily places his chin on Shen Wei's shoulder. He closes his eyes with a tranquil smile, like a sunbathing cat with a full belly.

Shen Wei thinks he's acting a little strange. "What's wrong?"

It takes Zhao Yunlan a while to say, "Nothing." Then he opens his eyes, gazing at Shen Wei's profile close up, and says without a change of expression, "Rarely does the great beauty show his affection. I'm overwhelmed by the pleasant surprise. Of course, if you let me get intimate with you, I'll be even more flabbergasted."

Taking advantage of Shen Wei's bewilderment, he quickly pecks him on his lips. Before Shen Wei can react, he retreats quickly and announces, "I'll go splash some water on my face, pick up Da Qing, and then I'll take you home to my family."

Not a single word about what he saw.

Zhao Yunlan and Da Qing are about to go there empty-handed and empty-stomached, but Shen Wei determinedly rejects this shameless plan. He drags the yawning Zhao Yunlan out of the car to shop for lots of gifts.

The closer they get, the more nervous Shen Wei becomes. If he weren't too much of a gentleman to go back on his word, he'd run away.

The door to Zhao Yunlan's parents' home isn't locked. He doesn't knock either, just opens the door right away, like he knows he's expected.

The place is large and appears quite empty. Past the entryway, they can hear the clanging of plates and bowls from the kitchen. Two pairs of brand new slippers have been placed by the door.

Da Qing bounces off of Zhao Yunlan, tiptoes towards the doorway of the kitchen, and meows politely.

Zhao Yunlan mumbles as he puts on the slippers, "Shameless fat fuck, you're way too old to act cute."

Da Qing turns his head and gives him a fierce glare.

"Oh, isn't it Da Qing?" The gentle voice of a woman comes from the kitchen. She wipes flour off her hands and tenderly picks the fat cat up. The sheer weight of the cat almost breaks her wrists. She sighs. "Look at your sleek little face, why are you getting fatter and fatter?"

A ruthless attack on Da Qing's greatest weakness. He has no response to that. His fat paws lie limply on the woman's hand and he maintains his cute expression, while his body looks more and more like a long, fat, black caterpillar.

Zhao Yunlan laughs.

Shen Wei can't help smiling, but he really cannot bring himself to laugh.

Zhao Yunlan's mother has aged well. Her long hair is tied up, revealing a slender neck. She doesn't look a lot like Zhao Yunlan; on

a closer look, there's perhaps some resemblance in the eyes and eyebrows. But the shape of her face is much more gentle and pretty, with a hint of a smile even when she's not in fact smiling. She's wearing a pair of rimless glasses.

At a glance, she has the appearance of a well-educated and elegant upper-class lady; perhaps when it comes to taste in a romantic partner, it's like father, like son.

But who would've thought that as soon as this "lady" sees Zhao Yunlan at the door, her look changes instantly. With a witch-like expression she says, "What are you laughing at, like you wanna laugh your teeth off. Get your ass over here!"

Zhao Yunlan hastily obeys, and his mother sees Shen Wei behind him.

She freezes for a moment. She turns to wash her hands, adjusts her glasses, and says with a gentle and welcoming expression, "Oh, this must be Xiao Shen?"

Zhao Yunlan puts his arm around Shen Wei's shoulder and pushes him towards his mother. "Your soon-to-be daughter-in-law. Pretty, right?"

Shen Wei is left speechless with embarrassment. He has never hated Zhao Yunlan more for his lack of respect.

Luckily, Zhao Yunlan's mother doesn't take him seriously. She glares at him, then notices the things Shen Wei is carrying. "Oh, you didn't have to bring gifts when you have dinner at auntie's place, why the formality?"

Zhao Yunlan points at his own nose. "Me! It was me! I bought all of that."

Zhao Yunlan's mother picks up a rolling-pin and hits him a couple of times. "No need to bullshit me. You bought it? If you ever have the decency to do that, I'll be happy. Go pour some water for our guest, and then help me make the wrappings!"

Zhao Yunlan's back is stained with flour from the rolling pin, but he doesn't dare get mad. "Roger that."

Shen Wei cautiously sits in a corner of the couch. When he's given fruit, he reluctantly nibbles on a tiny piece of apple. When he's given water, he sits upright and takes a very tiny sip.

When Zhao Yunlan's mother finds out Shen Wei teaches Chinese at the University, she says passionately, as if meeting a long-lost friend, "Oh that is great! Wouldn't it be nice to have a son like you. The men in our family... well, I don't want to say anything about them. Just sit here and wait, auntie will go make you some dumplings, then we can talk more."

Shen Wei smiles stiffly. His back is straight and tense like a fully-drawn bow.

Five minutes later, Zhao Yunlan has proven unhelpful in the kitchen; the wrappings are irregular and hideous. He's punished with further hits from the rolling pin. Zhao Yunlan squares his shoulders, half-heartedly dodging her blows; but in reality, he's not evading them at all—letting her hit him on one side, he whispers to her on the other, "Don't make me lose face in front of him."

Zhao Yunlan's mother says, "All you do is eat! You never do any work and you don't even come home anymore, what did I raise you for? Do you even have any face to lose?"

All smiles, Zhao Yunlan steps out of her reach, but doesn't leave the kitchen. Propping his hand against the wall, he watches her back as she's busy in the kitchen. He looks around and suddenly asks slyly,



"Where's auntie? And dad? Why is our beautiful miss at home alone?"

"Your aunt went home for the New Year. Your dad has to host a party<sup>86</sup>, he's not coming back tonight."

"Great." Zhao Yunlan is relieved. He watches his mother from behind and cautiously lowers his voice. "If dad finds out about this... he'll definitely kill me."

Zhao Yunlan's mother turns around. "What did you do now?"

"Nothing actually..." Zhao Yunlan's gaze wanders onto a chopstick rack. His eyesight has yet to recover fully and he can't help but squint. Then, he glances towards his mother. "So... um, mum, what do you think about homosexuality?"

Zhao Yunlan's mother doesn't seem to understand. "Not much. It's a normal social phenomenon, and it exists even in animals. Sooner or later, the law will recognise it. Why are you asking this? I was talking about your problem."

"That *is* my problem." Zhao Yunlan rubs his nose. "Don't be so academic with me. I just want to know, if one day your son came out to you, what would you do?"

"Don't change the subject, I..."

"Mum," Zhao Yunlan interrupts her. His wandering gaze settles, his expression shifting from guilt-ridden to stout-hearted. He gives her an unusually serious look. "I mean it, I'm not joking."

The rolling pin slips from her fingers and drops to the floor with a thud.

Zhao Yunlan sighs and bends down to pick it up, his toned muscles well defined beneath his clothes. "I'm afraid dad will find this hard to

accept, so I wanted to tell you first. I've thought about this; I can't hold out any longer, and I can't hide it from you, you're the only mother I'll ever get..."

Zhao Yunlan's mother is still petrified. In shock, she takes the rolling pin. After a long time, she stutters, "So... you brought him here..."

Zhao Yunlan nods, both hands on the door, standing there as if he's blocking it with his body. "I have to tell you, I went through so much in the last six months. I used all kinds of tricks and tactics: I sweet-talked, besieged and ambushed him, used all Thirty Six Stratagems, this-that and what-not, every single scheme that I could think of I used. Getting him was harder than a revolution. If you're angry just kill me, but don't hurt my darling, or I'll die of heartbreak."

Zhao Yunlan's mother seems to be struck by lightning. She stands motionless for a long time. Then, like a rebooted robot, with a bland expression, she begins picking up the dumpling wrappers and randomly puts ingredients inside.

Zhao Yunlan suspects he might've been too direct and scared his mother witless. "Ma?"

Zhao Yunlan's mother doesn't hear at first. For a few minutes, her head is in a complete muddle; like she doesn't know what she's doing or hearing, and just keeps working with her hands on auto-pilot.

It's not until Zhao Yunlan calls her a few more times that she comes out of her trance. She blurts out, "What about your job? And... what will other people say about you? Will your future prospects be affected? Right, I... I heard from your dad that you bought a house, do you still have enough money?"

Zhao Yunlan is stunned. He has no idea how coming out suddenly relates to money issues. It seems that her logic is a gigantic mess

now and she's randomly constructing sentences from keywords and brainlessly spouting them out.

His mother is well-educated and never had to worry about necessities<sup>87</sup> in her life. His dad has always provided well for her, she never needed to worry about anything, and she has an open mind. Zhao Yunlan's plan is simple enough: if he can take care of his mother, then his father won't be a concern. And luckily his mother is easy to communicate with; she's knowledgeable, well-tempered, sharp-witted, and easygoing. She can almost always deal with things sensibly.

He has expected many possible reactions from her. For instance, she might not accept it at first, maybe she'd be angry at him, or maybe she would calmly suggest discussing this matter for a few hours, or maybe like other mothers she would begin grilling him about Shen Wei's background... but he never expected such a worried and astonished reaction.

Perhaps it's because he has never been a parent himself.

Zhao Yunlan is speechless. For a while, he really doesn't know what to say.

After her outburst, his mother seems to have calmed down a little. She pauses with her chopsticks in her hand and asks, "Are you serious about this or is this some kind of joke?"

"How can I joke about this? If I made you angry like that, dad would cook me in a pot."

Zhao Yunlan's mother slowly stands aside. A long time later, she takes a deep breath. "Don't... don't tell your dad just yet. You let me think about this first... what kind of person is he? What... what does he do?"

Before Zhao Yunlan can answer, she pinches the bridge of her nose. "Oh, right, my bad, you told me, he's a teacher at Dragon City University."

She pulls herself together and fires off more questions: "Where does he live? Do his family members agree with this? What's he like? Is he a good person? Does he treat you well? I... I remember you had girlfriends before, why suddenly..."

Zhao Yunlan says smartly, "As long as you agree, no-one in this world will dare disagree. Dad will have to agree with you too, right? As for what he's like..."

He smiles. "In my heart, he's 'a perfectly crafted piece of jade, one of a kind in this whole wide world'. Just talk to him and you'll know. And hit me if you're mad at what I'm going to say: yes, I've had girlfriends, and I've dated a few boys before as well, but I'm willing to be completely gay for him."

When his mother looks at his face, her heart sinks a little. It's not selfishness; as a parent, watching someone fall in love with your child is moving, heart-warming and delightful, but if it's the other way round, it's a little bitter.

Amidst this bitterness, she says a little snappishly, "I don't believe you."

Zhao Yunlan's face remains still, but his heart is pounding with anxiety.

Unexpectedly, she continues, "If he really is as good as you say, then what does he want with you? Are his glasses not good enough?"

Zhao Yunlan stumbles and almost falls to his knees in front of her.



## Chapter 67

After getting into the taxi, Chu Shuzhi only states his address, and then leans back and rests in silence with his eyes closed.

Guo Changcheng doesn't know what's going on. He secretly peeks at him throughout the ride and finds Chu Shuzhi's face looks as if it were covered in a layer of gray ash; with his eyes closed, his face resembles mountain rocks weathered by long years of exposure: cold and void of emotion.

After Guo Changcheng pays the taxi driver, he remembers Da Qing's instructions. Hastily, he picks up the bag Chu Shuzhi has forgotten and runs behind him in small steps.

Chu Shuzhi lives deep within a small alley. Strong winds gust around the two people. A northwesterly blows into Chu Shuzhi's collar and inflates his already-oversized jacket, like he's about to be carried away by the wind.

Guo Changcheng can't help but call to him. "Chu-ge..."

Chu Shuzhi stops walking, turns around and glares viciously at Guo Changcheng. He says with an unusually soft but sinister voice, "Why are you still following me? Don't you know I'm not human?"

Guo Changcheng stops three steps away from him and stares at him blankly. "Then... then what are you?"

Faster than the eye can track, Chu Shuzhi is next to him. He snatches his bag from Guo Changcheng with icy fingers; his body seems to be oozing moisture. There's an indescribable gleam in his dark eyes. "Have you ever seen a zombie? Zombies feast on human flesh. Let me tell you what it tastes like. Human flesh is tender and

greasy, the tendons chewy and crunchy; the organs are rank and reek of blood. When they're pulled out, they're steaming hot, like meat straight from a cooking pot..."

He leers maliciously at Guo Changcheng and licks his lips. "I'm a zombie."

Guo Changcheng shivers intensely, but only from the icy hands. He feels that he ought to be afraid, but he can't feel fear rising up inside him as it should. Perhaps he has worked with Chu Shuzhi for too long. He figures that no matter what his Chu Shuzhi is, he can accept him.

Instead, his brain supplies a very strange thought: no wonder Chu Shuzhi doesn't eat peas.

Chu Shuzhi thinks that he's terrified, and gets some malicious satisfaction from it. He turns around and leaves, but only a few steps later, hesitant footsteps sound from behind him. He turns around, and there's Guo Changcheng following him again.

Chu Shuzhi raises his eyebrows. "What, you want to follow the zombie into a coffin?"

Guo Changcheng stands still. "I... I..."

Chu Shuzhi hmphs, and starts walking again. And there goes Guo Changcheng, scurrying after him in his typical little steps.

Chu Shuzhi's runs out of patience and bellows, "Before I get mad, fuck off!"

Guo Changcheng stutters, "Da... Da Qing told me to make sure you get home. You haven't..."

Before he can finish, he's crushed into a wall with immense force. Chu Shuzhi's skeletal hand of steel easily lifts him up by his throat.

Guo Changcheng's feet are off the ground, his back is against the wall, and the weight of his entire body is hanging on that one hand grasping his throat. He soon begins to suffocate, his face red.

Chu Shuzhi looks up at him coldly. Only close up can one see the subtle tinge of grey in Chu Shuzhi's eyes. It's not usually visible, but in direct sunlight, they look lifeless.

Guo Changcheng's legs struggle in the air frantically, but in vain. Instinctively, he grabs hold of Chu Shuzhi's hand, but he cannot remove it no matter how hard he tries.

"My conscience before heaven and earth is clear. I've borne this punishment for three hundred years. No matter what I did, it must've been repaid by now. Who do they think they are, what gives them the right to judge whether I leave or stay?" With a forbidding expression, Chu Shuzhi squeezes out these words through gritted teeth. "Maybe I should commit an actual crime for them to see!"

Guo Changcheng's eyes become watery. He really is a cry-baby; anything can make him cry. He's so boneless and soft, it's a wonder that he ever reached adulthood. It's like he lacks any sort of strength whatsoever. As he looks at Chu Shuzhi, he's incredulous, he's beseeching, he's dejected, and yet, he isn't angry.

Guo Changcheng moves his mouth with difficulty, but fails to make any sound. Judging from the movement of his lips, he seems to be trying to say, "Chu-ge".

Chu Shuzhi lets go and Guo Changcheng drops down to the ground. He slowly retracts his hand, and stands aside coldly, watching Guo Changcheng being wracked by a coughing fit.

With a complex expression, Chu Shuzhi looks at this kid who's always carrying a small notebook, following him around and jotting down notes. The notes are ludicrous: childish handwriting, scrawly and scribbly, about pointless matters. Basically, he jots down



everything anyone says, even pet phrases. Chu Shuzhi has seen him write down Da Qing's 'stupid human' many, many times; it doesn't seem like he's trying to learn how to do his job, but rather, he's carefully writing the biographies of all his seniors.

Watching him, he can still see the immense white light of virtue emanating from Guo Changcheng, who's still busy coughing up his lungs. He suddenly finds that light somewhat irritating on the eyes.

The hand that seized Guo Changcheng's throat just now suddenly pats him on the head gently. Reflexively, Guo Changcheng shrinks back.

Chu Shuzhi caresses his head, and then softly fondles his hair, like patting a child or a small animal. He says in a low voice, "You probably didn't study much when you were young. Do you know this excerpt from 'The Injustice to Dou E'?<sup>88</sup> It says very clearly: 'Those who do good lead impoverished and short lives, those who do evil are blessed with fortune and thrive.' Ever heard of it?"

He has heard of it, more or less. Unfortunately, studying really isn't Guo Changcheng's strong suit. Whenever he tries to remember something from a textbook, his brain automatically erases everything, like re-formatting a hard disc. His face still red and his neck swollen, crouching on the ground, he looks up at Chu Shuzhi miserably.

Chu Shuzhi bends down slightly, holds up Guo Changcheng's head by the chin in scrutiny, and shakes his head. "Your forehead isn't wide, that means bad fortune for your parents. Your auricles are thin and soft, that means frequent hardships in your younger years. Your dorsal bridge has a slight hump, that means by middle age you'll lose the support of your elders, and live the rest of your life in ruin. Your face determines your dreadful fate. You've accumulated so much virtue, but apart from making you poorer, what good does it do

you? Don't be so stupid; just enjoy being from a rich family while you can. Perhaps there are still a few prosperous days ahead of you."

Guo Changcheng looks up at him, uncomprehending.

Chu Shuzhi stares at him for a while, and suddenly laughs bitterly. "You're really just a naive child, aren't you."

Then, he picks up Guo Changcheng like a little chick, and waves his hand. "Go back and tell that cat shifter, what's there to worry about me? I'm just a nobody. I'm gutless and powerless. I'm just a puppet. I don't have the means to cause trouble, and I'm not suicidal. But if there's nothing else, I'll take a few days off during the New Year. I'll be back after the fifteenth."

With that, he vanishes into thin air right under Guo Changcheng's eyes. Like a cloud of vapour, gone in the blink of an eye.

The long and narrow alley is deserted, not a single person in sight. It smells like sulphur from firecrackers. The streets seem rather desolate on this first day of the New Year. A chilly breeze swirls through Guo Changcheng's hair. He's standing motionless for a long while, tear-stained and sniffing and staring ahead blankly. Finally, he turns around and heads home with heavy steps.

He doesn't know whether what Chu Shuzhi said was helpful or whether he was just venting his feelings, but Guo Changcheng finds what he said unreasonable.

Bad fortune is his destiny, and nothing can be done about it. But what does that have to do with what he does with his life?

Guo Changcheng has always felt like a useless piece of garbage, an utter waste of space and resources. As for the other things, some might say it's charity, some might say it's kindness, but he only does them so he can feel like he's of some use.

He never wanted anything in return.

Yet... hearing someone attest to his 'dreadful fate' chokes him up a little.

~~~

When Shen Wei leaves Zhao Yunlan's place, he feels like he's about to collapse. He was very careful not to show any 'flaws' in front of Zhao Yunlan's mother, worrying that it might get Zhao Yunlan into trouble. But Zhao Yunlan's mother kept staring at him with X-ray vision, until it felt like she was staring holes into him.

On the way back, Shen Wei pinches the bridge of his nose. "Why did your mother keep looking at me like that, did I give anything away?"

Before Zhao Yunlan can say anything, Da Qing, who's hugging a full box of dried fish in the backseat, butts in: "Zhao Yunlan used to fool around a lot before, he was a notorious playboy. His mum must be afraid of her own shadow by now⁸⁹."

Shen Wei doesn't want to make trouble out of nothing, but after hearing this he can't help but frown.

"You little fat fuck, if you keep talking nonsense I'll throw you out of the car, you hear me?" Zhao Yunlan says, deadpan.

Da Qing sits up, letting his tail wag back and forth like a clock pendulum, the embodiment of innocence. "Meow, meow..."

Zhao Yunlan glares at him in the rear-view mirror. Then he says to Shen Wei, "About that, don't think too much; though I used to be... ahem, I've never before brought anyone to meet the old lady. Besides, I'm a brand new person now, I've changed my evil ways; even criminals are given a chance to start a new life! No, hold on, besides being dumped all the time, I never did anything bad in the past. That fat fuck, trying to make me look bad... Actually her

reaction just now wasn't because of you, it was mainly because when we were making dumplings I accidentally came out to her..."

Shen Wei's expression freezes. Luckily, he's not the one driving.

"Oh." Da Qing pauses for two seconds, then says dryly, "Fighter for the new era, Zhao Yunlan, I have faith in you."

Shen Wei stutters, "You... you told your mum..."

"I told my mum that I love you till the sky crumbles and the earth shatters into splinters. If she agrees, she'll have another son, so two sons in total, but if she doesn't, she'll lose a son, and then she won't have any left," Zhao Yunlan says forcefully. "My mum isn't stupid, she can do the math, don't you worry."

Da Qing ruthlessly pulls him off his high horse. "Drop the act, you would never dare speak to the empress like that... Professor Shen, you see flour on his body right? He must have kneeled down to his mum in the kitchen... two days ago he even made sure that his dad wasn't coming home today, what a puny wimp."

Zhao Yunlan is speechless.

Oh... shit....

Shen Wei doesn't know what to say for a moment. After some time, he says softly, "You really are..."

Really what? He doesn't say. His sentence trails off into a soft sigh.

Eventually, Da Qing breaks the ambiguous tongue-tied silence, tired of their mushy love talk. He says bluntly, "Oh right, Zhao Yunlan, let me ask you something, did you know Chu Shuzhi's shackle of virtue expires today?"

"Oh?" Zhao Yunlan hesitates, and a moment later he remembers. "Has it been three hundred years already? Then what did he say? Is he leaving the SIU? But either way it's a good..."

Before he can say 'thing', Da Qing interrupts, "Good, your ass! The Underworld won't let him take it off."

Zhao Yunlan frowns. "Why not?"

"How would I know, some nonsense like 'not enough virtue'. It's not like they have a clear index, who knows how virtue is measured, and how much is enough; after all, they call the shots."

Shen Wei asks, "How come Chu Shuzhi is wearing a shackle of virtue?"

"Uh," Da Qing says. "Sometimes the Guardian Order is short-handed, and the Guardian will take in a prisoner from the Underworld, some form of transmutation into labour, I guess."

Shen Wei nods, and explains somewhat unhappily, "There is nothing to be done about it. Most prisoners in the Underworld are small ghosts and spirits, not particularly useful. As for those with actual power, unless they hand themselves in, it is not so easy for the Underworld to capture them. It has been the Underworld's habit to extend the duration of the shackles of virtue; they usually add one or two centuries more."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't say anything. His frown deepens.

After all that has happened, Zhao Yunlan's grudge against the Underworld isn't news; it's just that the time for turning against them is yet to come.

Of course it's normal that each side has their own strategy. Zhao Yunlan is no longer a naive teenager; he's well aware of all the

messed up plotting and scheming. But so long as they all have similar goals, some underhandedness doesn't bother him.

But lately, Downstairs has been interfering quite a lot; though Zhao Yunlan doesn't say anything, he's annoyed.

Then, Shen Wei asks, "Why is Chu Shuzhi wearing a shackle of virtue, could you tell me?"

"I only know roughly what happened, but not the details," Zhao Yunlan replies. "You should ask Da Qing."

Da Qing sits in the back seat, cat eyes gazing at Shen Wei... he knows that Shen Wei must be a powerful figure, but exactly how powerful is uncertain. Not even Zhao Yunlan can explain all the unscrupulous, unwritten rules of the Underworld, how come Shen Wei seems to know them inside and out?

This has Da Qing hesitating for a long while before he says slowly, "Chu Shuzhi's cultivation is the Path of the Undead; you must have realised as much, Professor Shen?"

Chapter 68

"Initially, Chu Shuzhi was set on this path by a sage. You could call it fate, or fortune. But he did not become one of his disciples... and this is not peculiar either; the undead are often eccentric and unorthodox. Chu Shuzhi is better than most; their kind usually struggle to communicate with anyone, which is why most people think they are devilish and foul creatures. All those years ago, Chu Shuzhi somehow stumbled into their kind, and he was not aware of a lot of rules and taboos."

"Professor Shen, you're wise and well informed, so you must be aware that the foundation of the undead's cultivation is their tombs. If their tombs are destroyed before they reach a certain level of cultivation, then their spiritual essence is damaged as well. All cultivators are consumed with the importance of karma. Sabotaging another's cultivation with no good reason will be met with rightful vengeance, and that aligns with the conscience of the Heavens and no-one can intervene." Da Qing embraces his precious little dried fish snacks, and says with dignity and a slowly waving tail, "Once, someone was trying to catch a cricket and chased it into some unmarked graves. They accidentally dug up Chu Shuzhi's tomb looking for it. When they couldn't find it, they got so furious, they burned down the whole forest containing Chu Shuzhi's grave. Fortunately, Chu Shuzhi had already passed the Gates of the Underworld and was on his way to the Doorway to Heaven. He was no longer afraid of the sun and could walk freely out of his grave. So although his grave was demolished, his body was not harmed."

"No wonder Chu Shuzhi is always so on edge, he's even worse than me." This seems to be the first time Zhao Yunlan hears of this. "I thought it was just because he's undead. He deals with the dead every day; he's alright when nothing gets in his way, but if he's mad

he'll bite anyone's head off. So what did he do to that person? Cut up their stomach and eat all the insides? Swallow them whole?"

"He hung them up to dry, then gobbled them down like bacon," Da Qing says. "Normally, it would be considered that person's own fault, and no-one would intervene. But the problem was that the tomb vandal was merely a kid, a spoiled one from a wealthy family. At the time of the incident, he was one day and a half away from his seventh birthday."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't quite understand. "Eh, why does it matter that he was not yet seven?"

Shen Wei explains softly, "Young shifters that have yet to complete their cultivation fear small children below the age of seven the most. If they are hurt by adults they can seek revenge, but kids are innocent, and the saying goes that 'Heaven doesn't judge children's bad deeds, it only records their good deeds'. So if they are killed by naughty kids, they can only succumb to their fate. And if they dare hurt them, it is a grievous sin. His case was decided three hundred years ago, and closed cases cannot be reopened, otherwise I would..."

Otherwise, the authority of the Ghost Slayer might provide room for negotiation, perhaps.

"Oh man, Lao Chu," Zhao Yunlan blurts out, not knowing what else to say.

In fact, this kind of cultivation inherently goes against the Heavens. The chance of success is one in ten thousand. It requires talent, diligence and luck—especially luck.

If it were Zhao Yunlan, he might've thought that the kid was a brat, but all he would've done was maybe give him a nightmare to scare him a little. After all, no injury or death was caused. He would've known better than to hold a grudge against a six-year-old. 'Heaven

doesn't judge children' is a rule with good reason. Can a young child tell right from wrong? Cultivators can avoid them, play dead, or camouflage. It's not difficult to hide from kids. As for the ones that really cannot be avoided, perhaps it's karma, perhaps it's a trap, or perhaps it's simply 'the will of Heaven'.

Unfortunately, Chu Shuzhi is as narrow-minded as can be, and when he's out for revenge, he won't let the Heavens stop him.

Indeed, fate is as inexorable as it is insidious.

Zhao Yunlan's gaze turns cold. Certainly the will of Heaven should not be disobeyed, but since when did the same apply to the will of the Underworld?

He takes out his phone and hurls it towards the back seat, telling Da Qing, "Call Chu Shuzhi."

On the first attempt, Chu Shuzhi hangs up.

Zhao Yunlan says blandly, "Try again."

After the third call, Chu Shuzhi turns off his phone.

Zhao Yunlan hits the brakes and stops the car at the curb. He takes out a Guardian Order talisman from his wallet and rapidly scribbles a few words on the talisman: 'Meet me at No. 4 Bright Avenue before midnight.' Then, he folds it into a paper crane.

Before he can send it out, a traffic officer knocks on the window. "Hey, what's going on, why are you parking here?"

Zhao Yunlan bends down and pretends to be in agony. "Sorry, I have a cramp in my leg. I need a minute, just one minute."

While he's talking, he sticks his hand out the window and stealthily wipes his palm on the car door. The paper crane in his hand turns

into a swirl of smoke, vanishing in the air.

Afterwards, Zhao Yunlan doesn't head back to his place. Since the sky isn't too dark yet, he drives to their new place near Dragon City University.

The house is only one street away from the University grounds. It's a garden villa with a unique architectural style. Zhao Yunlan gropes in the car's glove compartment for a bunch of keys, carefully takes one off the ring, and hands it to Shen Wei. "I know you don't need keys to get inside, but let's make it official."

Shen Wei is stunned. His hand inadvertently tightens around the key.

Zhao Yunlan grabs his hand and leads the way, pulling him along. "The walls and ceiling works at our place are basically done. They started putting in the floors before the New Year, so it must be quite messy now, but give it one more week and it'll probably be finished. You can then move your stuff here, put what you use often at my place. We'll wait until the end of the month, and then we can move in together. Come on, the lift is this way."

His palm is warm and dry. Shen Wei feels as though his heart has been dipped in water; aching, softening and swelling.

There are only four floors, and one flat to a floor. The car park is in the basement, with elevator access; there's still some renovation debris in the elevator.

But inside the apartment, there's ample natural lighting. Even at sunset, the afterglow shines through and delineates grubby sundries on the floor with golden contours. From the window, one side is the lush view of Dragon City University, and the other side is an artificial creek. Even though the creek is dry in winter, the waterline is still visible in the stains on the river-side stone statues.

Zhao Yunlan says, "As the saying goes, a wife deserves a house of gold. But I don't have that much money, if I build a house out of gold I'll probably be investigated for corruption. You'll have to settle for this for now. When I earn more money, we'll build a better one."

Then he turns around, all smiles. "The master bedroom is in the south, it has a balcony; you can pick one from the other rooms to be your study."

Shen Wei's eyes grow heavy; his thoughts and feelings, which have been repressed for millenia, spring to life like a flame, with almost unspeakable desire. He wants to lock him in an embrace and crush his flesh and bones into dust in his palm.

But Shen Wei knows that he won't even touch a hair on his head.

Of course, there's always a third wheel: there's always some insolent cat who likes to make his presence known. It's a feline victory that the two lovebirds are prevented from getting too cosy on the messy floor.

Before Shen Wei can say anything, Da Qing bounces onto the window sill and announces at the top of his voice, "I want a guest bedroom! I want a suspended cat bed! Swing style!"

"Fuck off," Zhao Yunlan says mercilessly. "Suspended, your fat ass, would you even manage to jump up with all that weight? Let the people downstairs have their peace... besides, I didn't ask you, don't you see I want some alone time here? Keep your dog nose out of my business, remember that you're a cat!"

"My jumping power is just fine, and I'm much faster than you. You're the stupid dog, you blind guy!"

Zhao Yunlan doesn't bat an eye. "Fat fuck."

All this talk of weight problems has gotten Da Qing quite mad; he pounces onto Zhao Yunlan's shoulder and runs his claws through Zhao Yunlan's hair.

"I'll let you know what a fat guy can do!"

"Fuck, you messed up my hairstyle, you're a dead fat fuck!"

Man and cat rapidly get into a chaotic row.

Shen Wei sighs slowly and leans against the window. The last rays of the setting sun hit his body, and even his forever-pale face is beginning to warm up. He quietly watches the bustling living room and smiles faintly.

At this moment, a black shadow emerges from his sleeve. Shen Wei's smile wears away; frowning, he flicks his fingers and the black smoke turns into a letter. Shen Wei opens the letter and glances down at it. It reads, "Black clouds have emerged northwest of the Thirty Three Skies. Very bad omen. Requesting Your Honour's prompt return."

Shen Wei crumples the letter into a ball and seizes it in his palm.

"Yunlan," he suddenly says, and both Zhao Yunlan and Da Qing turn to him simultaneously. "I have some urgent business, I have to leave for a while. If you're free during the holiday, go home to spend time with your parents. Have them take care of you so that I don't have to worry."

Zhao Yunlan frowns. "What is it?"

"I don't know yet. My puppet delivered a letter from the Underworld, black clouds in the Thirty Three Skies; I'm afraid it's important. No matter what, I must go." Shen Wei gently pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Black clouds?" Zhao Yunlan is stunned.

Shen Wei mistakenly thinks that Zhao Yunlan doesn't understand, and explains briefly, "Normal clouds never reach the Thirty Three Skies. There are only two types of clouds up there: auspicious ones arriving from the East and glowing with a purple aura, or billowing black ones, which are a bad omen."

Da Qing licks his paws. "It's been a long time since black clouds last appeared. From what I know, black clouds were last seen up in the Thirty Three Skies eight hundred years ago."

"What was the cause back then?" Zhao Yunlan asks at once.

Da Qing is puzzled. "How would I know?"

Shen Wei says nothing, and he can't help avoiding eye contact with Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan is becoming something of an expert at reading people... especially someone who's bad at hiding their feelings, like Shen Wei. Something sparks in his mind, and he blurts out, "Is it related to Ghost Face? Was it him as well last time? Who the hell is he really, why is he so powerful?"

Da Qing is even more puzzled, "Ghost Face? Who is this Ghost Face?"

The tinge of redness from the sunset vanishes from Shen Wei's face.

Zhao Yunlan can't bear seeing him like this. He glares a warning at Da Qing, then unclenches his jaw and stops questioning Shen Wei. "Then go, and be careful. I'll leave the door unlocked for you tonight. Come back soon."

Shen Wei can't say much, since Da Qing is there. He gazes at Zhao Yunlan longingly, and within three steps, he vanishes into a cloud of

black smoke.

Zhao Yunlan walks out onto the balcony and looks up at the sky; the afterglow is greying out. He lights a cigarette.

Da Qing jumps onto the railing and asks, concerned, "Do you really know Professor Shen's background?"

Zhao Yunlan silently nods.

Da Qing's head tilts to one side. "What are you worried about?"

"A lot." Zhao Yunlan blows a smoke ring and squints through the smoke. "Hey, Da Qing, let me ask you something. How come there's this one person I just can't find a single word about, no matter how many classics I go through?"

"Who?"

Zhao Yunlan hesitates, then says, "Lord Kunlun."

Da Qing opens his mouth, but then closes it again. He sighs and walks along the railing until he's facing Zhao Yunlan. "Plants and animals aren't like humans, we aren't born with intelligence. We need to be immensely fortunate to even have the chance to set foot on the path of cultivation, and only with much experience do we begin to understand humans. Lord Kunlun was around in the times of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors⁹⁰. When Mount Buzhou collapsed, he was already regarded as a deity. Then afterwards he disappeared, and that was at least five thousand years ago. Yes, I was there too, but I was like an ignorant infant. Do you remember things that happened when you were a toddler⁹¹? To tell the truth, until you left me, I was only a lazy kitten who didn't care about anything but sleeping and eating. You overestimate my cultivation."

Zhao Yunlan impatiently lights another cigarette.

Da Qing lowers his head and whispers, "If I knew, I wouldn't lie to you. We're different from humans: we're stupid, and even centuries of cultivation will only yield limited awareness. We just know we have an owner. I have you as my owner, and that's all I need."

Zhao Yunlan flicks away some ashes and abruptly says, "Actually, I saw a portrait of Lord Kunlun somewhere."

Da Qing looks up.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't continue, but Da Qing understands from his expression.

"A kitten..." Zhao Yunlan is silent for a while, then blows another smoke ring. "For how long did you remain a kitten... what place on earth can impede the growth of a cat?"

The summit of Mount Kunlun was the origin of all the deities, as well as the resting place of many gods and devils, forever shrouded in white snow. On the mountain grows an ancient flower. From the dawn of time until now, it's still no more than a slender stem, but every growth ring marks an era of countless tales.

Da Qing grows more and more uneasy. Ever since Zhao Yunlan said 'Lord Kunlun', Da Qing can't help but feel like an invisible hand is pushing them all towards a destined outcome.

Just like all those years ago when Pangu ended Chaos, when Gonggong demolished Buzhou⁹², people even worried about the sky collapsing, when Kuafu was chasing the sun⁹³, when Houtu⁹⁴ scattered in the depths of the Underworld...

Da Qing has goosebumps all over, and his fur is standing on end.

All things wax and wane. From past to present, one doesn't have to look back very far: in only five thousand years, countless deities

have risen and fallen. They're as insignificant as ants, no different from humans. Nothing can always remain on top in this world.

Did Pangu really put an end to Chaos? Or did it merely assume another form?

Da Qings's emerald eyes flash with unspeakable terror. Most memories from his kitten days are gone, and yet, just like he can still recognize the smell of that man's first incarnation, some memories have found their way deep into his flesh and bones.

Lord Kunlun, the Primordial God of the Mountains, no less divine than the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, why did he vanish without a word for thousands of years?

Da Qing dimly remembers the green gown, of the colour of mountains in the distance, its sleeves exuding the aroma of fresh snow and bamboo. Unrestrained laughter, warm hands tenderly lifting up his body... could he really be...?

At this moment, the piercing screech of a bird comes from somewhere close by. Da Qing and Zhao Yunlan both look in the same direction. Even in winter, the area near the university is replete with vegetation, and many birds reside there. Following that mournful call, countless crows soar into the sky. All the crows in the city are flapping their wings, almost covering the entire sky.

Crows foretell calamities.

Amidst the sounds of wind and crows, Zhao Yunlan suddenly asks a serious question. "I want to tell you something, can you keep a secret?"

Da Qing turns around cautiously and raises his head to look straight at him. "My lips are sealed. Tell me."

"Shen Wei is the Ghost Slayer," Zhao Yunlan says offhandedly.⁹⁵ "I'm a bit worried about him."

Da Qing reels as if suffering a stroke; his foot hits empty air and he falls straight off the railing.

Chapter 69

Da Qing tumbles to the floor head over heels in an embarrassing fashion, and pounces up like a fat meatball. His first reaction is to roar loudly at Zhao Yunlan, "I can't believe you have the gall⁹⁶!"

Zhao Yunlan hums distractedly.

"You... you you you....!" Da Qing is lost for words. He has been roaming the world for centuries and has seen countless strange phenomena, yet only now does he realise what 'thinking with one's dick' means.

Now it seems clear why King Zhou of Shang killed to please Daji, why King You of Zhou pranked his army, or why Emperor Xuanzong of Tang abandoned the affairs of his empire... These foolish men will do anything in the face of beauty!

Da Qing is flustered and petrified. Then, he asks in a feeble voice, "Then... you... what... how far have you gone?"

Zhao Yunlan rubs his nose. "Not far, we've been in bed together, but we only slept; he's shy, he never let me touch him."

Da Qing is left speechless.

In bed... together... shy... never let him touch...

These words are like a bombing raid; explosions echo around Da Qing and his soul is bombarded with force even greater than thunder and lightning from the Nine Heavens.

At an instant, images of Zhao Yunlan and Professor Shen together flash across Da Qing's mind. Every scene punctures a hole in his

small head. This poor cat suddenly experiences new worlds of fantasy and wonder... motherfucker, is there a worse cat owner in this world than Zhao Yunlan?

Da Qing struggles to extend his neck covered in thick layers of fat, and stares at Zhao Yunlan for a long time in deference, admiration and incredulity. "What a pervert." Truer words have never been spoken.

The black cat hops back onto the window sill on wobbly legs. "Do you know what kind of person the Ghost Slayer is?"

Zhao Yunlan flicks some ashes away. "That's what I want to ask you."

"I don't know either." Da Qing gets serious. "Ever since the beginning, all the deities of the Heavens and all the shifters of the earth, I've seen them all and I know them all. But the Ghost Slayer is a different story. Do you know how serious this is?"

Zhao Yunlan isn't surprised. He saw Shen Wei's painting... if he has seen Lord Kunlun, then he must be from a time when Da Qing was still ignorant.

"Just tell me what you know."

"Do you know Houtu?" Da Qing asks.

Zhao Yunlan hesitates, and then says, "According to the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*⁹⁷, Gonggong gave birth to Houtu, so she's a descendent of the Flame Emperor. In the Summons of the Soul, Houtu is said to be the goddess in charge of the Underworld. In some later folk tales, 'Houtu' is usually seen as the counterpart of 'Huangtian', so her status seems to be even higher... in some legends, Houtu is thought to be Nüwa."

"More or less," Da Qing says. "When Gonggong destroyed Mount Buzhou, and Nüwa repaired the sky pillar, she then turned into soil, and separated Yin and Yang; that marked the beginning of the order of the universe. Some say that the Ghost Slayer was born from pure dark energy, and some say that he was born in the depths of the Underworld. But the dreariness of the Underworld is only the imagination of humans, this so-called dark energy really has nothing to do with the Underworld... After all, the Ghost Slayer was around before the Underworld was formed. Why say he was born some thousands of miles underground?"

"So you're saying that the Ghost Slayer wasn't born in the depths of the Underworld?"

"Perhaps somewhere nearby. But I think he's only working with the Underworld for a mutual partnership, they aren't actually related." Da Qing says, "I can't say for sure about incidents that are too ancient in time, I can only hazard a guess. Most say that Houtu is the earth, but the true earth was formed when Pangu struck out with his axe and destroyed Chaos. Just think, Nüwa repaired the sky, she finished her job, why did she have to turn into Houtu and become one with the earth? Was she trying to cover up the true earth? Whatever is down there, it must be somewhat related to the Ghost Slayer."

The cigarette in Zhao Yunlan's hand is almost burnt out, but he doesn't notice.

Da Qing sighs. "I can only think of so much. These things are too ancient; this water is way too deep, and you... how did you get involved with him? You really just can't keep it in your pants, can you?"

Perhaps it's even more tragic that he hasn't even gotten the chance to get his pants off...

"Too late." Zhao Yunlan puts out the cigarette and flicks it to the floor among the debris. "You're telling me this way too late."

Da Qing says grumpily, "That's because you didn't tell me who he was when you first started seducing him! Otherwise I would've stopped you no matter what it took..."

"No, when I say you're too late," Zhao Yunlan interrupts, "I mean you're late by a few thousand years."

The black cat stares at him blankly. For one moment, he almost believes that Zhao Yunlan is remembering something. But then, Zhao Yunlan only lights yet another cigarette and stands by the window, silhouetted in the fading light and casting a long shadow.

Da Qing keeps him company while he finishes a whole pack of cigarettes. When the whole floor is full of cigarette butts and his pocket is empty, Zhao Yunlan signals Da Qing to jump onto his shoulder and walks out.

Da Qing asks, "Where to?"

Zhao Yunlan says with a cold face, "Bright Avenue. I'll see Chu Shuzhi first, and then meet with someone from the Underworld... my people won't be taken advantage of by anyone."

~~~

The day workers of No. 4 Bright Avenue have just left. Chu Shuzhi isn't here yet. Zhao Yunlan puts out some dried fish and milk for Da Qing and enters the library.

He picks up a pair of protective glasses hung by the door and puts them on. He notices Wang Zheng in a corner, panickedly jumping away from Sang Zan. Zhao Yunlan says calmly, "Keep going, don't mind me."

Wang Zheng tsk-tsks at him and hurriedly leaves.

Sang Zan runs his hand through his hair; he has thick skin and doesn't seem to feel embarrassed at all. "Still need Kunlun?"

For some reason, obscured by the plexiglass lenses, Zhao Yunlan's gaze seems exceptionally cold. His nose seems even straighter and longer, and in these last few days, he seems to have gotten slimmer. His handsome profile appears somewhat unapproachable and withdrawn.

"No need, all the useful ones have been wiped by someone." Zhao Yunlan's fingers run across the books on the shelves. "I want to find out... about Nüwa."

Sang Zan hesitates.

"Nüwa creating humans and repairing the skies, Chiyao battling the Flame Emperor, Gonggong fighting Zhuanxu... I want all of it. They can wipe out one person, but I don't believe they can change all of history." Zhao Yunlan adjusts his glasses and climbs up the steel ladder.

Crossing his legs, he sits down on the highest rung of the ladder. He goes through the books and throws down one book after another. Sang Zan doesn't disturb him, quietly waiting at the bottom and organising the books into a pile.

Most people would assume that Zhao Yunlan's bedside entertainment consists of reading Playboy, or maybe watching Sora Aoi<sup>98</sup> on his tablet, but his knowledge of ancient texts is exceptionally profound, and he reads at an impressive speed. He quickly picks up the gist as his fingers fly across the page, and all that can be heard in the library is the sound of turning pages.

Occasionally, Zhao Yunlan pauses for a moment, puts down the book, and rubs his eyes forcefully. Using simple words and talking slowly, he then exchanges a few words with Sang Zan.

"Mount Buzhou is the path to Heaven." Zhao Yunlan gestures downward, somewhat exhaustedly bowing his head, his voice a little hoarse, "As it's recorded in history, Gonggong and Zhuanxu fought for power. In the end, Gonggong was defeated. In his fury, he rode off on a godly dragon and destroyed Mount Buzhou."

Sang Zan listens with all his might, and after a beat, he slowly nods.

"I don't buy this." Zhao Yunlan stares at Sang Zan. "The Flame Emperor battled Chiyao for countless years, the sky, the earth and the universe were in utter chaos, but Mount Buzhou was never affected; Pangu hacked open the sky and the earth with an axe, but Mount Buzhou was still intact. Even if the godly dragon was born with godly powers, would it really be enough to knock down Mount Buzhou?"

Sang Zan is used to ignoring all unnecessary adjectives and nouns. After a while, he says with his weird accent, "If this is impossible to happen, someone made it happen."

"Destroying the Pathway to Heaven," Zhao Yunlan's finger lingers on the ancient book, "Huangtian, Houtu... not counting the ones that have fallen, or the ones that have gone missing, then we're only left with..."

Sang Zan looks up into his deep gaze.

"After Mount Buzhou collapsed, Nüwa repaired the collapsing sky with her multicoloured stones, and then transformed into Houtu, and later dissipated completely." Zhao Yunlan's eyebrows are tightly locked, and he continues, "Mount Buzhou was connected to the sky, but not to the earth... the Underworld was not yet formed at that time. So Nüwa repaired the sky and created the earth... the sky had a hole and was raining incessantly, but what about the hole in the earth? The earth... the ground... soil..."

Zhao Yunlan's voice gradually fades until he's no more than mumbling to himself, but then he suddenly says, "Hold on, give me the passage about Nüwa creating humans again."

Just as Sang Zan is handing him the book, Da Qing comes sneaking in and says to Zhao Yunlan, "Chu Shuzhi is here."

Zhao Yunlan puts away the book and climbs down the ladder. He takes off the glasses and hands them to Sang Zan before patting him on the shoulder.

He's about to leave when Sang Zan says, "Bag then, there was no order. Every won wanted more bow... power. Mount... you said 'path way to heaven'—if it brake, my bee someone wanted to end..."

He can't think of the appropriate word, so he gestures with his hands. Zhao Yunlan instantly understands: he's trying to say 'war'. Zhao Yunlan nods to Sang Zan on his way out. Just like that, he has provided him with a new perspective.

The universe was first created; it was a time when countless deities fought with each other. The Flame Emperor defeated Chiyou, and gave rise to a new order. Mankind flourished after Nüwa breathed life into figurines made of clay; thus, something called power was born. No matter who did it, perhaps knocking down Mount Buzhou was their attempt to put an end to the old order and make a new one; to return the world to... back to the very beginning, when all beings flourished and lived peacefully?

Zhao Yunlan recalls his weird dream. Who was talking to him in the dream? What did he mean?

~~~

Chu Shuzhi isn't alone, he has a little tail: Guo Changcheng is dressed like a ball of cotton, his neck is wrapped up in at least two scarves. They're covering half his face, making him look like a new

generation Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. One of the scarves is obviously not his own.

Apparently, when Chu Shuzhi vanished, Guo Changcheng walked in the direction of the bus station for a few minutes. But then he changed his mind and didn't wait for a bus after all. It was only the first day of the year, and he already failed the mission that Da Qing had given him. He felt really guilty, and so he went back to the small alley and searched tirelessly, forcing himself to stammeringly ask strangers for directions.

His constipated expression and inarticulate words resembled a foreigner practising to speak Chinese.

After Guo Changcheng had been searching for over half an hour in the biting wind, a kind-hearted community caretaker took pity on him. She led the cold and red-nosed Guo Changcheng to Chu Shuzhi's doorstep.

When she left, Guo Changcheng didn't dare knock on the door. He walked in circles in front of Chu Shuzhi's door, and he couldn't hear any sign of activity from inside. He couldn't and didn't want to leave, but when he thought of how annoyed Chu Shuzhi was at him, he didn't dare knock on the door, either. When the Guardian Order talisman summoned Chu Shuzhi to No. 4 Bright Road, and he went outside, he realised that a frozen, foolish child had been sitting at his doorstep for a long time, and so he brought him along.

~~~

The atmosphere in the office is tense. Chu Shuzhi sits at his desk, one hand in his pocket, and the other fooling around with Zhao Yunlan's lighter. He glares at the desk with a menacing expression. Da Qing walks back and forth on the side quietly. The only noise in the SIU office is Guo Changcheng sniffing and blowing his nose.

Seeing Zhao Yunlan coming out of the wall with a book, Chu Shuzhi looks up slightly. "What am I here for?"

Zhao Yunlan sits down across from Chu Shuzhi, studies his expression, and says bluntly, "We don't need to mince words. I just have one question: are you planning on leaving?"

Chu Shuzhi lowers his eyelids and doesn't say a thing.

Zhao Yunlan says coldly, "Take that hand out of your pocket, don't think I can't smell what's inside!"

Chu Shuzhi snickers and pulls his hand out of his pocket, holding a small piece of bone. The end of it sparkles with a faint indigo glow; the bone is hollow, with four holes along its length. It's a bone whistle, used to control zombies and other undead creatures. Because manipulating a dead person's corpse is disrespectful, the bone whistle has always been considered a kind of dark magic.

Guo Changcheng sneezes. Chu Shuzhi glances at him sideways and says slowly, "I think you should send this poor kid home first..."

Zhao Yunlan ignores him, and says to Guo Changcheng, "Xiao Guo, sit down. Da Qing, ask the kitchen to make him some woad tea."

"Tell me, what do you plan on doing?" Zhao Yunlan pressures him. "You're gonna take this stinky thing and go back into the soil to be the Zombie King? Forever trapped in the shackles of virtue, hiding in the shadows, always running from the Underworld?"

Chu Shuzhi's face freezes. "Three hundred years ago, I was impetuous and didn't know the rules. I broke the rules so I suffered the consequences; I didn't do anything wrong for the past three hundred years... What else do those Underworld types want from me? They can't just walk all over me!"

"Extending the shackles of virtue is standard procedure. If other people can accept it, why can't you?"

Chu Shuzhi's voice deepens as he spits out one word after another, "I. Am. Not. Other. People. Let me remind you, Zhao Yunlan, I willingly put on the shackles. I submitted to them, but that doesn't mean I admit I was wrong..."

Zhao Yunlan interrupts furiously, "You have the audacity to defend the messed-up things you did in the past?"

Chu Shuzhi slams the desk. "Yes, I said it, so what? I don't regret it. If I could do it all over, I'd still skin that brat alive, I don't mind another three hundred years of imprisonment! How are kids and adults any different? There are only two kinds of people: those I can kill, and those I can't. After all, Chief Zhao, *I'm* not asking for trouble, *they're* coming for *me*. If three hundred years weren't enough, then it'll never be enough... I might as well then, it doesn't matter how many times I do it. Those kids better watch out for me; my bone whistle will dissolve their souls and turn them into little ghosts."

Zhao Yunlan slaps him across the face. Fast, precise, firm and loud. Chu Shuzhi's face is knocked to one side.

Chu Shuzhi doesn't seem to mind, but Guo Changcheng recoils in shock and falls off the chair, landing on his butt on the floor.

The two men glare at each other with hostility. Da Qing growls softly. For a moment, it seems like they're going to fight.

In that moment, a cloud of grey mist seeps in from the window. It whirls around Zhao Yunlan's shoulder, flows down his arm, and turns into a letter.

It's an urgent note from Shen Wei: "An Underworld messenger is coming, no matter what he asks you to do: don't agree to it, wait for me to come back. — Wei."



## Chapter 70

Zhao Yunlan reads the note silently, and his cold and stern expression loosens up. Carefully, as he rarely is, he folds up the note and stores it safely inside his wallet, as if it was a love letter.

Chu Shuzhi glances at him, and gets up to leave. But before he can, three Guardian Order talismans fly from Zhao Yunlan's hand, trailing sparks, soaring up into the air. Guo Changcheng hasn't even had time to get up from the floor again, when they burn out and coalesce into the form of a shackle, rushing straight down at Chu Shuzhi.

A tremendous force crushes Chu Shuzhi back onto the chair; he cannot move at all anymore.

Chu Shuzhi's contract with the Guardian Order has yet to be dissolved. No matter how powerful he is, he's still bound by this pact.

Zhao Yunlan glances at him and takes out a voice recorder from his desk drawer. He hits play, and Chu Shuzhi's last words are repeated: "Those kids better watch out for me; my bone whistle will dissolve their souls and turn them into little ghosts."

Sounding from the machine, his voice is horrifyingly cold and excruciatingly coarse.

"Do you hear yourself? Is this something a sane person would say?" Zhao Yunlan asks without an expression.

Chu Shuzhi's eyes flash. But the next moment, he obstinately turns away and says defiantly, "I'm not a person."

Guo Changcheng mutters, "Chu— Chu-ge, don't be mad."

Chu Shuzhi glances at him coldly, not saying a word.

Guo Changcheng hesitates for a long while before cautiously walking up and tugging at his clothes. He whispers in a tiny voice, "I — I think you— you don't believe that at all; I didn't understand, but I know you're a good person, Chu-ge, you won't do bad things for no reason..."

Zhao Yunlan humphs, and leans back in his chair. He taps his lighter on the tabletop a couple times, lights a cigarette, and turns towards Chu Shuzhi angrily. "Put the saddle on the right horse, Chu Shuzhi. Even a little kid like Guo Changcheng understands that, but all you do when you're pissed off is fuck everyone over. I really feel ashamed for you."

Chu Shuzhi glares at him with pitch black eyes.

"What are you looking at? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? I don't have time to deal with you right now... Xiao Guo, push him into my office, lock the door and keep an eye on him. There's a single bed in there, if you're tired you can lie down and have a rest."

Guo Changcheng immediately asks, "Then what about Chu-ge?"

"Him?" Zhao Yunlan glances at Chu Shuzhi. "He can sit, give him time to think things through and come to his senses."

He picks up his tea cup and swirls the cold tea dregs. Deceptively calm, he continues, "I really wanna splash this tea in your face."

Guo Changcheng pushes the chair with Chu Shuzhi towards the office door. Then, he can't help turning back to look at Zhao Yunlan. Seeing the Chief wave at him impatiently, he pushes Chu Shuzhi all the way into the office, and gently closes the door behind himself.

Zhao Yunlan rests his legs on the desk, puts a book on his knees, and starts reading.

The legends related to Nüwa are scattered across different sources. The book he's holding right now is called the *Record of Ancient Secrets*. In particular, it contains a chapter called 'Feng Nüwa'<sup>99</sup>. The original book was probably written by a daoist scholar from the Song dynasty, but the author is unknown, and the original version was lost; this is an illustrated copy printed in modern times.

The beginning quotes from the Imperial Reader<sup>100</sup>, the passage about Nüwa creating humans: "Legend has it that at the dawn of time, humans didn't yet exist. Nüwa crafted men out of clay, yet the quest of creation proved onerous and toilsome, thus the goddess let a rope down through the soil, and from the earth hauled up innumerable people."

The author then notes: "Humans, blessed with five sense, all take the form of empress Nüwa herself. They're born with the power of speech from the soil of the earth. The winds from Heaven feed three eternal fires on each and every one, the soil from the earth imparts three eternal evils to each and every one. They're gifted with intellect but are unclean. From infancy to senescence, they're born at dawn and perish at dusk. Nüwa pitied them, and took the role of matchmaker. The goddess married them in pairs and thus the species flourished for centuries."

Zhao Yunlan takes a pen from the desk and underlines 'the winds from Heaven feed three eternal fires on each and every one, the soil from the earth imparts three eternal evils to each and every one'. Then he flips the page and begins reading the part on 'Repairing the Sky'.

"Huainanzi reads: In primeval times, the four pillars collapsed, the nine continents fissured. The sky ceased to shelter, the earth ceased to bear. The world was devoured by inextinguishable flames and irrepressible torrents. Beasts preyed on humans, raptors snatched the decrepit. So Nüwa repaired the sky with five multicoloured

stones<sup>101</sup>, cleaved the four legs of the Ao<sup>102</sup> to replace the four pillars, killed the black dragon to free the people, and burnt reed to halt the flood. Hereafter, the skies were mended, the pillars were intact; the flood was dried out, the land was at peace; the monster had been slain, and the people had been saved."

There's another footnote which reads: "The ancient Ao bestowed its legs, and Empress Nüwa was eternally grateful. She granted it extravagant garbs as fins. The four pillars held up the universe. In the northwest of the skies, Kunlun declaimed: Rock, not yet old but ravaged; water, not yet cold but frozen; body, not yet lived but dead; soul, not yet burnt but dispersed. Such are the impossible, thus sealed where unreachable, and named the Four Mystics. The sky shall not collapse, the earth shall not crumble, and the Four Mystics shall not come forth. Henceforth, the world shall be at peace."

Zhao Yunlan strokes Da Qing's fur, and says quietly, "It says here that human's evil comes from the soil, and then Nüwa used the Great Turtle's legs to hold up the sky. Kunlun spoke of the four pillars... mountains don't speak, so here 'Kunlun' must be referring to Lord Kunlun... also, I've heard of these few lines before."

"Where?"

"At the Awl of Mountains and Rivers." Zhao Yunlan says, "If 'the impossible' is referring to the Four Mystical Artefacts, then does that mean when all four are gathered, 'the impossible' will be completed, and the four sky pillars will be reachable?"

Da Qing pads in circles around his hand, and mumbles, "What kind of mess is all this, I'm getting a headache just listening to it."

Zhao Yunlan ignores him, and continues along his train of thought, "Five multicoloured stones to repair the sky, then if I'm right, perhaps the four pillars are in fact meant to ground the earth... I think it all



makes sense now; Ghost Face wants to use the Four Mystical Artefacts to destroy the four pillars."

Zhao Yunlan has touched the dried fish snacks, and their aroma lingers on his fingers. Although Da Qing doesn't want to appear too desperate, he really can't resist the temptation. He sniffs at Zhao Yunlan's fingers incessantly and asks, "Who's this Ghost Face that you all keep talking about?"

Zhao Yunlan briefly summarises what happened at the Awl of Mountains and Rivers. Then he says with a stern expression, "Ghost Face wears a mask, but I think I have a guess what he looks like."

"It can't be..." Da Qing wonders.

"I'm afraid he looks a lot like Shen Wei." Zhao Yunlan sighs softly. "This guy, he keeps way too much to himself. He's kind to everyone, but not to himself; who knows why he's an enemy of himself. I really worry about him..."

Da Qing looks up. "What?"

Zhao Yunlan looks down at the black cat, and their eyes meet. Then all of a sudden, he takes his legs off the desk, sits upright, and whispers, "Someone's here."

As soon as he's said that, the faint sound of wooden clappers can be heard, slowly coming closer. A heavy cold aura begins to manifest, and the northwestern wind is making the windows rattle. Zhao Yunlan calmly takes out some incense from the drawer, lights it up, and sticks it into the flower pot on his desk. Then, he takes out an ashtray and burns some paper money in it. Smoke rises; he puts away the book and pours himself a hot cup of tea.

Having learnt his lesson last time, the intruder stands at a distance outside the door, and says, "My apologies, Lord Guardian. I've come from the Underworld uninvited. Might you find the time to let me in?"

Zhao Yunlan smooths out his expression and clears his throat.  
"Please come in."

The door to the SIU office creaks open. Immediately, the visitor can smell the incense and the burning paper money. As expected, there's nothing money can't accomplish<sup>103</sup>. The visitor's expression wordlessly softens into a smile. He promptly bows and says politely, "The Lord Guardian is too kind."

When Zhao Yunlan sees who the visitor is, he's stunned for a moment, too. He stands up and says with surprise, "What brought you here, Your Honour?"

The judge retains his friendly composure; not like someone sent by the Underworld, but perhaps like a kind matchmaker.

The two take their time making smalltalk before they finally sit down facing each other; all polite on the outside, but harbouring distrust on the inside. Da Qing jumps into Zhao Yunlan's lap, wrapping his tail around Zhao Yunlan's wrist. He glares at the judge with his emerald eyes, like he's protecting Zhao Yunlan.

The judge finally gets serious. "Sorry for disturbing you late at night, but I've come to you for a reason. I have a request, and hope that the Lord Guardian can help for the sake of the people."

"Oh please..." Zhao Yunlan waves his hand, "don't flatter me<sup>104</sup>". I'm just an ordinary human who knows a little magic. Thank you for thinking of me as a stout tree, but I'm just a small weed. I don't know what to do if you flatter me like that. Go on, if it's something that I can do, I'll try my best."

The judge sits still and sighs. He wants to wait for Zhao Yunlan to start asking questions, but Zhao Yunlan seems to be utterly oblivious

and keeps drinking tea. After a while, the judge can't help it, and asks, "Did you notice the crows in the evening, Lord Guardian?"

Zhao Yunlan puts on a surprised face. "No. I was watching the repeat of the New Year's celebration on television with my mum this afternoon, I didn't pay attention."

The judge is speechless.

Zhao Yunlan asks with utmost innocence, "What about the crows?"

The judge knows that he's playing dumb. He really didn't want to come talk to the Guardian. For starters, the judge is one of the few who knows about Zhao Yunlan, and he would really prefer not to anger this mighty god. Not only that, but the mighty god has the thickest skin possible, and is as sly as a fox. He has three godly skills: being shameless, stalling, and avoiding the topic... even one of those can quickly drive a man to drink. In short, he's the stuff of the judge's nightmares.

"Crows are always a bad omen. Black clouds are forming in the northwest. Someone who isn't afraid of divine punishment has set up an altar at the peak of Mount Kunlun, attempting to steal one soul from every living person."

Zhao Yunlan is stunned, and asks, "Every single person? There are billions of people on earth, is he strong enough to lift them all?"

He's met with baffled silence.

Zhao Yunlan smiles, and says, "I'm confused, do explain. Who's on that snowy Tibetan mountain, what did they build, and what for?"

The judge takes out a wanted poster, and even at first glance, Zhao Yunlan recognizes him: it's Ghost Face.

"He's the king of the foulest creatures from the filthiest place in the world. Long story short, Nüwa sealed him in the depths of the Underworld in primordial times. Gradually, the seal loosened, and he managed to escape. You understand, Lord Guardian; I won't beat around the bush with you. I'd say eight tenths of his power is still under the seal of the goddess Nüwa. If we go up against him together we still have a chance, but if he breaks through the seal completely..."

Zhao Yunlan listens to this jumbled mix of truth and lies, and can't keep the corner of his mouth from twitching. He refuses to buy into the judge's deeply worried facade, and pretends not to understand. "Ow, that's terrible. A filthy creature sealed by Nüwa... So is he worse than other evil creatures? Is he more powerful?"

The judge has nothing to say.

Zhao Yunlan continues with enthusiasm, "Then what does he need so many souls for?"

The judge catches a breath, and says, "He's going after the Ink Brush of Virtue. Every person carries a soul and on it good and bad virtue is recorded, from past lives and the present, red as good and black as evil. If he collects the souls and gathers them at the peak of Mount Kunlun, he'll get the Ink Brush of Virtue. We cannot let that happen, otherwise..."

Zhao Yunlan suddenly interrupts, "Some time ago, a small crow shifter baited me with a fake Ink Brush of Virtue, and hurt my eyes. Now my vision is still not perfect, I see shadows all the time, and when I look at you, you seem to have gained weight. Now that I think about it, that 'someone' tricked me intentionally, didn't they?"

The judge's heart pounds faster, but no words come out of his mouth. He looks at Zhao Yunlan who stares back with a mocking look. The crow tribe feeds on decayed corpses, and has always been oppressed by the Underworld. That the crows are sent by the

Underworld is nonsense; the judge can't help but wonder which idiot came up with that idea.

The judge's thoughts are whirling, sweat running down his back.

"The Four Mystical Artefacts have been scattered across the universe for so long, but the Underworld never paid attention to them, never thought to search for them or keep them safe. Now that something has happened, you tell me it's serious, and leave me with this last-minute mess. That's not very reasonable, is it?"

The judge squeezes out a smile. "Well... this is negligence on our part..."

"Negligence?" Zhao Yunlan raises his eyebrows. "Why do I feel like it's an abuse of power?"

The judge really is on tenterhooks.

Zhao Yunlan knocks on the desk, and his face turns dark. "We've worked together for many years. Let's get to the point, what do you want me to do?"

The judge says, "Lord Guardian, would you please lead me up to Mount Kunlun to put an end to his plans?"

Zhao Yunlan says calmly, "Why me? I stay indoors all day, I'm no backpacker. I've never climbed Mount Lianxiang, I don't even know from which side to approach Mount Kunlun, and you're asking me to lead the way?"

Finally a response that the judge foresaw. He has an answer prepared, and speaks with much better fluency. "You might not know, Lord Guardian, but the Guardian Order Token is in fact a piece of wood from the Holy Tree on top of Mount Kunlun. That Holy Tree was planted by Pangu the creator, and it's as old as the world. The

peak of Mount Kunlun is a forbidden place, and only this can serve as a pass."

Zhao Yunlan points towards the photo on the wanted poster, "Then this... 'king of evil', how did he get up there? Through the backdoor? Don't tell me he's Pangu's brother-in-law."

"I wouldn't disrespect the divinity," the judge says cautiously, "but this evil creature was born beneath the Underworld, next to the Ancient Tree of Virtue, which sprang from a branch of the Holy Tree on Mount Kunlun. Indeed, he's somewhat related to Kunlun, so..."

Zhao Yunlan continues with a half-smile, "Then summoning the Ink Brush of Virtue on top of Mount Kunlun is also related to that tree?"

The judge isn't sure what he means, and doesn't dare answer lightly.

Zhao Yunlan says, "Beneath the Underworld... hey, isn't that quite near where the Ghost Slayer lives?"

The judge hesitates, and answers ambivalently, "You could say that."

"Oh!" Zhao Yunlan's face brightens up with a smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "So the judge is implying that the Ghost Slayer is related to the evil creature."

The judge can't be sure whether he's really dumb or playing dumb now, talking about that unspoken truth so casually. He hesitantly scrutinises Zhao Yunlan, but can't find any clues whatsoever.

They already gave him the black book, does he know that Shen Wei is the Ghost Slayer or not?

The last time the messenger came back and reported that being blind didn't stop Zhao Yunlan from fooling around with his lover. Then... perhaps he doesn't know? Otherwise, how could the Ghost Slayer tolerate...

The judge calms himself down, strokes his beard, and puts on a concealing smile. "I wouldn't dare speak of Immortals behind their backs, would I? You must be kidding, Lord Guardian."

Zhao Yunlan looks at him and starts searching in his pockets. "You want the Guardian Order Token? Hold on, let me find it for you."

The judge hastily waves. "No, no, we cannot touch the holy Guardian Order Token. You'll have to come with us to Mount Kunlun, Lord Guardian."

Zhao Yunlan stops what he's doing, and stares at the judge as if he doesn't understand. His irises are black and bright, and his gaze is piercing. The judge forces himself to meet it. As always, he finds he's stuck with an arduous but fruitless task.





## Chapter 71

After a while, Zhao Yunlan stops pressuring him with his glare, looks down and frowns half-genuinely. Slowly and calmly, he asks, "Besides, I find it very strange that you don't even dare touch the Guardian Order Token, and yet you recognise an ordinary human like me as the Guardian. Why is that? Me, I'm just some guy who's great at bluffing and bullshitting, but there's nothing behind it. I can't do a single thing, I just keep stuffing my face, and my brain isn't working well either. You see, I lose it as soon as someone drugs me."

The judge feels an internal twinge, but he forces out a smile. "That's not true."

Zhao Yunlan suddenly leans in closer. "Don't tell me my ancestors are related to Kunlun. That's way too badass."

The judge silently laments his lot.

Unfortunately, Zhao Yunlan has no intention to let him off easy, and keeps on yapping. "And boy has it been hectic the last six months, first the Sundial of Reincarnation, then the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, and now the Ink Brush of Virtue. If the fourth one appears too, we'll have a full set, one for each cardinal direction <sup>105</sup> .

"Hey, what do you think, where do the Four Artefacts even come from? So it seems the Ink Brush of Virtue is related to Kunlun. As for the Sundial, legend tells that it was crafted from the Three-Life Stone. I heard that back when Nüwa created mankind, a pebble would form for every human that was created. Eventually she raised her head, and saw that the pebbles had already accumulated to form a great funnel-like pillar, almost piercing the sky, threatening to swallow the Three Realms whole. Nüwa hastily collapsed it and

sealed it, turning it into a stone containing the previous, current and future life of man. So later on it was called the Three-Life Stone. This way, the Sundial is related to Empress Nüwa as well. As for the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, the tortoise Xuanwu<sup>106</sup> belongs to water, so perhaps it's related to Fuxi? We're in deep water here, aren't we? I'm terrified just thinking about it."

The judge wipes sweat off his brow. "My knowledge is limited, this is really..."

"Besides, a calamity in the Thirty-Three Skies would definitely attract many formidable figures. Saving all living souls, what a tremendously virtuous deed; there must be many who'd want to seize this opportunity. Who else has the Underworld joined forces with? The fairies? Cultivators from various Sects? Angels? The Ghost Slayer must also be obliged to do his duty, and weed out the corrupt ones, right?" Zhao Yunlan pauses for a moment and glances towards the judge. "You know, I'm such a small fry, I can't do shit about this. I don't know anyone aside from the Ghost Slayer, what would I do if I go? Unless..."

The judge's heart is beating up into his throat while he listens to Zhao Yunlan laugh lightly and slowly say, "I'm just supposed to approach his Lordship, say hi, and chit-chat a bit?"

The judge is terrified. He looks up abruptly, only to meet Zhao Yunlan's implacable expression.

For a moment, he believes the man sitting across from him might have figured him out, but he cannot see any discernible clues.

Da Qing's fur stands upright, and he lets out an unfriendly growl. It's a sound coming from deep within his throat, not like a sound a cat would make, but rather the roar of a tiger. He stands up on Zhao

Yunlan's legs and reveals his razor-sharp claws towards the judge; the bell on his neck quivers.

The judge seems to fear him, shrinking back into his chair. He looks up to Zhao Yunlan, all smiles and pleasantries. "Lord Guardian, what are you trying to say...?"

Zhao Yunlan relaxes completely and leans back to bonelessly lounge in his chair. "I think we need to properly talk about this: it's the New Year, I'm just a weak little mortal<sup>107</sup>, and yet you're dragging me into such a dangerous ordeal? Whatever shall we do if something goes wrong, what if I don't get to see next year?"

"We swear we'll ensure your safety, Lord Guardian."

"You can't even walk up the mountain on your own," Zhao Yunlan sneers. "How will you ensure my safety?"

"Well..."

Zhao Yunlan jumps on his chance. "I'm bringing my own men; that shouldn't be a problem, right?"

The judge looks dazed.

Then, Zhao Yunlan, scourge that he is, puts on a look as if he has a toothache, and the judge can't help but feel like he's getting one too. Zhao Yunlan lets out a long sigh. "But I don't have enough people. You see, almost all my staff are nocturnal; at best they can only run errands, there's not much use for them. The only ones I can order around during the day are a little snake that still can't fully transform, a kitten less than a foot long, a useless trainee, and a selfie-obsessed geek..."

The judge can just tell where he's going with this.

"We do have a Zombie King who's quite strong, except... oh, what a pity!"

The judge weighs what's more important, Chu Shuzhi's affairs or the Ink Brush of Virtue. Of course he's not stupid; he already knows. Though the Underworld has made it a custom to keep extending jail time, it seems that it won't do them any good to oppose Zhao Yunlan at a time like this, especially on something so trivial. So the judge compromises. "Chu Shuzhi's time has been served; we only have some procedural matters to finish. Now that you've brought it up, Lord Guardian, I'll issue the order right away. He's free to go immediately."

"Whooo." Zhao Yunlan hears his tone and seizes the opportunity to twist the knife deeper into the wound, making his expression colder. Solemnly, he says, "The way you put it, you made me think he was worthless, or he did something terrible behind my back again. I even shackled him and locked him up next door to reflect on his deeds! Look at this mess, your people aren't very efficient, it seems. What a misunderstanding! Those who don't know the details might even think the Underworld is stalling on purpose."

The judge is lost for words; he really wants to drop dead right in front of Zhao Yunlan. He doesn't know when exactly he would've offended this troublesome Guardian, who he feels is toying with him on purpose: whacking him twice on the head, then giving him a sweet to give him a little bit of hope and, before he's even caught his breath, there's two whacks on his head again.

Zhao Yunlan waves his hand, then grudgingly takes a piece of paper out of his desk and begins writing. "Forget it, Chu Shuzhi and I still aren't on good terms. That means I really don't have enough backup right now, but, Your Honor, what you speak of is an important matter. I can't stand in the way of that! It would eternally weigh on my conscience..."

The judge seems to be getting used to his torture. He holds his breath in suspense, feeling like he's in a horror movie: the sky is clear and bright, surely something menacing must be looming. The judge looks at Zhao Yunlan with increasing anxiety.

Sure enough, Zhao Yunlan continues, "I can't go, but you don't dare take the Guardian Order Token either, so I've come up with the perfect plan: find someone who dares to take it."

The judge instantly has a bad feeling. He takes a look at the letter, barely able to decipher Zhao Yunlan's handwriting, which resembles a doctor's scrawl: "To the Ghost Slayer: this letter speaks for me."

The judge almost falls right off his chair.

Of course it's not that the Underworld is afraid to take the Guardian Order Token. It's just that those in the Ten Halls had a discussion, and concluded that three of the Four Mystical Artefacts have emerged in the world. The Sundial has probably fallen into Ghost Face's hands, but it's still unclear where the Awl of Mountains and Rivers can be found. Even if the Ghost Slayer disdains working with them, he's not stupid; of course he wouldn't hand it over on his own accord. Who can say for sure that the Ghost Slayer will never try to do what Ghost Face is doing? If he turns on them, who can they go crying to?

Currently, there's no-one on the Underworld's side who can stand up to those two mighty gods, and they're suspicious of the Ghost Slayer, so they resorted to using Zhao Yunlan to influence him.

But this Guardian is so crafty, he gets to the essence of things very quickly. Trying to take advantage of him is virtually impossible. Just from the line he wrote, the judge feels like Zhao Yunlan already knows everything they're thinking, and is only toying with him.

He doesn't know exactly how much Zhao Yunlan has figured out, or whether he has already contacted the Ghost Slayer privately, but he

simply can't handle this anymore; his expression turns serious.  
"What do you mean by this, Lord Guardian?"

Zhao Yunlan says innocently, "Nothing really. Does the judge think this is inappropriate?"

The judge stares at him coldly.

Zhao Yunlan continues, acting even more surprised. "How come? Doesn't the Ghost Slayer come from the Underworld as well?"

Another question the judge can't answer.

For a moment, he sits in bitter silence. He finally understands what is meant by 'to hide a lie, a thousand more are needed', especially with this guy who's poking holes in all his lies like his life depends on it. After half a minute of awkward confrontation, the judge says stiffly, "That foul creature was born beneath the Underworld in front of the Ancient Tree of Virtue, and is somewhat related to the Ghost Slayer, so he is kind of implicated."

"Oh." Zhao Yunlan lets his smirk fade a little, and nods. "Judge, you only just said something about not discussing Immortals behind their backs; aren't you being a hypocrite? If you're uncertain about him just say it straight up, it's not like I can't understand. Then I've really been approaching this the wrong way."

He crumples up the letter into a ball and throws it away. "I'll go with you."

The judge is knocked unconscious by this sudden windfall<sup>108</sup>.

Next, Zhao Yunlan takes out his phone and calls HR. "Hey, Wang Zheng, it's me, did you get my message? Mhmm, right, print a copy, bring it upstairs for our guest."

Wang Zheng is well-trained for this: within three minutes, she floats in with a long list of names. When the door opens, the judge can see a horde of ghosts floating in the corridor, big ones and small ones, cramming into the door crack, all silently staring into the room, making the judge's hair stand on end.

Zhao Yunlan rests his chin on one hand; with the other he pushes the list of names towards the judge. "These past few years have been full of unjust cases. Some perpetually postponed for procedural technicalities, some simply disproportionate punishments. Since you're here already, how about we settle this once and for all? Ah, right, as for Chu Shuzhi's affairs, weren't there some of his 'old belongings' still with you?"

The judge sits in silence.

Zhao Yunlan prods, "Hm?"

The judge finally grinds out between his teeth, "They'll be returned."

Zhao Yunlan is still not satisfied. "When? We're gonna need some time to pack."

The judge has had enough of Zhao Yunlan at last. With the words, "Before dawn," he rolls up the list of names and leaves.

Zhao Yunlan smirks at his scurrying figure, lights a cigarette with the burning paper money before he puts the fire out, and opens the window for some air.

Da Qing jumps onto the window sill. "Didn't the Ghost Slayer tell you not to go?"

"Why are you so nosy?" Zhao Yunlan glares at him, and then gets serious. "There's no debate, I must go."

Although Shen Wei seems gentle and polite on the outside, he's in fact extremely stubborn. There aren't many things he's willing to lose dignity arguing over. Even though the Underworld government suspects him or tries to involve him in schemes, he always follows his own principles. Zhao Yunlan thinks that he must be clinging to a duty he has to fulfil, and has already planned the outcome for himself. He's got a bad feeling about it.

He rubs Da Qing's head, swiftly dodging the counter-attacking cat paw. "I want the Ink Brush of Virtue; I can use it as my wedding present..."

Da Qing is pissed off. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Set a thief to catch a thief." Zhao Yunlan's face darkens. "The Kings of the Underworld have a term of a century; this batch has only been around for twenty, and they've become worse and worse. I never meant to cross them, but they messed with me first... so I'm taking you up to Kunlun with me. Mount Kunlun is a forbidden and sacred place, not a backyard for their freak show."

Da Qing bounces onto his shoulder. "What about Chu Shuzhi?"

"Leave him, how dare he talk to his boss like that." And yet Zhao Yunlan can't help but bring out the key, gently push open the door to his office, and look inside.

Guo Changcheng is already sound asleep, but he didn't dare lie down on the bed, but simply dropped onto Zhao Yunlan's desk. Chu Shuzhi can't do a thing against the Guardian Order, so all he can do is sit. But he has a blanket wrapped around him, and Guo Changcheng probably feared that he might be bored, and gave him earphones, then put a long movie playlist on.

Chu Shuzhi nonchalantly glances towards Zhao Yunlan, looks through him as if he wasn't there, then turns back towards the computer screen.



Zhao Yunlan locks the door and leaves. "Keeping an eye on a prisoner became serving a great king. Guo Changcheng, this motherfucking idiot, how I pity his uncle."

The next day, Guo Changcheng is awakened by a phone call from Zhao Yunlan. He rubs his eyes, and is shocked to find Chu Shuzhi already standing up. The blanket is now wrapped around Guo Changcheng. Chu Shuzhi stands in front of the window with a stern expression, frowning and glaring at the sky... it's pitch-black; the street lights are out.

The sky is still dark.

Zhao Yunlan says, "Xiao Guo, are you up?"

Guo Changcheng rubs his eyes again and makes an affirmative noise.

Zhao Yunlan puts on a very rare gentle tone. "In a bit, someone will be coming over to No. 4 Bright Avenue. It's someone from Downstairs, you should prepare some gifts. Keep an eye on Chu Shuzhi, tell him to stay calm, this isn't the time to start a fight. No need to say too much to them, but don't be afraid either, got it?"

Guo Changcheng nods sluggishly. "Chief Zhao, where are you?"

"I have something to do." Zhao Yunlan seems to be losing the signal, there's some buzzing static before he urges Guo Changcheng, "Call your family, and listen to Chu Shuzhi."

Guo Changcheng puts away the phone, and immediately hears a chilling sound of wooden clappers. He turns around, and there's a knock on the door of Zhao Yunlan's office. Chu Shuzhi turns around and says calmly, "Come in."

The locked door opens, and a paper man wearing a high hat comes in with a gigantic bag, which he places in front of Chu Shuzhi with reverence. The man puts his hands together, mutters something, and Chu Shuzhi's body begins to change: some writing appears on his face, and shackles become visible around his neck, wrists and feet. Then they fall off, landing on the floor, where they roll up into a ball and are sucked into the paper man's hands.

Guo Changcheng's mouth is agape with shock.

The paper man bows; Guo Changcheng returns the bow, and accidentally bangs his head on Zhao Yunlan's computer monitor.

Chu Shuzhi glares at the Underworld messenger with arrogance, and then opens the bag. Most of the items inside are made from bones, sparkling with cold violet light. These are all familiar to him—from three centuries ago.

Chu Shuzhi frowns, and then asks coldly, "Where's the Guardian?"

The messenger must have been lectured by the judge. He shakes his head indicating he can't speak and, feigning complete ignorance, bows to the two men and wobbles away.

~~~

Right this moment, the Ghost Slayer is at the bottom of Mount Kunlun. He takes a deep breath of the thin, freezing air reminiscent of barren ancient lands. It's dawn, and yet the peak is pitch-black and clouds are hanging low.

Vague sounds of wailing and weeping are mixed with the wind; chillingly macabre, as if slumbering souls from the Underworld were being awakened.

His hand falls to his blade. Right in that moment, he hears footsteps from behind. Without turning around, he says indifferently, "Let's get

moving."

"Hang on," a familiar voice says. "The one who invited me isn't here yet. I was afraid the plane might be delayed so I came early."

The Ghost Slayer turns around abruptly, and sees Zhao Yunlan: he's wrapped in many layers of hiking gear, and a black cat is following him. He's holding a cup of coffee, and taking a bite out of a burger. He waves, and says with a blissful smile, "Have you eaten? I still have a hash brown."

Chapter 72

The Ghost Slayer—Shen Wei—is at the end of his tether; his hands are shaking with rage.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't seem to realise that he's making Shen Wei's blood boil... or perhaps he just pretends not to notice. He finds a rock with a little less snow on it and sits down on the edge. He finishes his cup of coffee, then picks the slice of cheese out of the burger with his teeth and flings it away before biting into the burger.

Shen Wei silently shields him from the wind until he has finished his breakfast. Then he asks, deliberately lowering his voice, "What did I tell you?"

"No matter what the Underworld asks for, don't agree to it, and wait for you to come back." Zhao Yunlan wipes his mouth.

Shen Wei lowers his voice more. "Then what are you doing here?"

Zhao Yunlan looks around, making sure that there's no-one with them besides the black cat. Then he walks up to the Ghost Slayer and wraps his arms around his body, which feels as cold as an ice sculpture. Standing up on his tiptoes, he places a light kiss on the forehead under the large hood. "Are you angry?"

Da Qing looks away, finding the spectacle too horrible to endure.

Shen Wei doesn't move, remaining still as a rock. "Do you really like getting on my nerves? I... I really wish..."

Zhao Yunlan lets go of him and looks at his shrouded face. For a moment, he can tell where his eyes are beneath the black mist, and he can even feel the glare. Zhao Yunlan sighs, grabs Shen Wei's hand, but then lets go and whispers, "You can punish me however

you want, all right? I'll even kneel on a washboard. There won't be a next time, I promise... Besides, this isn't entirely my fault, you can ask Da Qing, it's all because of that brat Chu Shuzhi; otherwise the judge wouldn't have gotten the drop on me..."

Of course, in fact it was Zhao Yunlan who got the drop on the Underworld's schemes, and even managed to bargain for Chu Shuzhi's release! The cat ignores him, and begins cleaning his face with his paws... if this deceitful man can be trusted, pigs can fly ¹⁰⁹.

"And there's no going back at this point." Zhao Yunlan puts his palms out in helplessness, "Hey... don't be mad, I can't bear seeing you mad... Shen Wei? Ah Wei, Xiao Wei, baby.... don't ignore me, say something."

Shen Wei makes no sound, his fists painfully clenched inside his sleeves.

This 'baby' thing got Da Qing shuddering from head to tail, shivering like he has cramps. He slinks away silently, not wanting to hear it any more.

Zhao Yunlan is about to lean forward, but suddenly he stills. Then he quickly resumes a neutral expression and takes a few steps back. A crowd approaches, with the judge in the lead, followed by Ox-Head, Horse-Face, Black Ghost, White Ghost, and numerous others, including the shifter tribes, and perhaps a few sages. Zhao Yunlan knows at a glance that none of these people are ordinary.

Zhao Yunlan and the Ghost Slayer stand side by side, the Ghost Slayer enigmatic as always, Zhao Yunlan expressionless; perhaps due to the cold or lack of oxygen at this altitude. His face is pale and his lips have no colour. He turns around with a slight frown, and nods politely. "Morning."

The judge can't tell for how long Zhao Yunlan has been here, or what is going on between the two.

Yet, for Zhao Yunlan and the Ghost Slayer to meet first was their plan after all... now they're here at the foot of Kunlun mountain, the Ghost Slayer wouldn't let Zhao Yunlan go back on his own, so he has no choice but to take him along. They figure that even if he has second thoughts, he won't dare do anything with his sweetheart here.

But with that plan, the Underworld is rubbing him up the wrong way. They've utterly infuriated him.

The judge tries to figure out the Ghost Slayer, whose form is enveloped by ever denser, darker smoke; his heart is pounding with fear.

Despite his title, the judge is subordinate to the Ten Kings of the Underworld, and has no real power. At times he feels like his job is nothing but running tiresome errands and being the scapegoat. Now that the ones in power are the younger generation, they know little to nothing about the ancestors. In the judge's mind, those ten are simply idiots who think they're infallible because they have great power.

Never mind Zhao Yunlan, but someone like the Ghost Slayer... forget grovelling and flattery, they're deliberately locking horns with him. Haven't they heard that biting dogs don't bark? If the Ghost Slayer gets seriously mad, not only the Underworld, but even the Thirty-Three Skies might not survive his blade.

The judge smiles tremulously, his heart in his throat, muttering, "Lord Guardian, you've arrived quite early."

Then he turns towards the Ghost Slayer, bows almost to the ground, and says most reverently, "Your Hon..."

The judge is still bent over and hasn't finished speaking, when the Ghost Slayer turns away and heads up the mountain without a word. In the face of this miserable creature, he's throwing basic etiquette out the window; he really is enraged.

The judge doesn't dare complain. Forcing out a laugh, he hastily ushers the crowd forward to catch up; he knows that the Ghost Slayer is only constraining his anger because Zhao Yunlan is present.

The sky grows darker and darker. Violent gales rush through the thundering Nine Heavens; above, there seems to be a black dragon weaving and dancing behind the clouds.

Perpetually covered in snow, endlessly lofty, magnificently jagged and steep, Mount Kunlun pierces the clouds.

*From hill to hill no bird in flight, from path to path no man in sight.*¹¹⁰

As they enter the mountain range, Da Qing starts moving restlessly on Zhao Yunlan's shoulder; he seems to have recognised something.

As soon as Zhao Yunlan sees Mount Kunlun, all his doubts and suspicions vanish into thin air.

He has never seen Kunlun before. Not in a million years would he have thought that a gigantic snowy mountain could have any connection with him. And yet, as he enters the Kunlun range in his sleep-deprived state, he instantly feels a blood-bond.

It's a subtle feeling, like a data line deep in his soul suddenly interfacing with the entire mountain range as one elaborate network.

For one moment, Zhao Yunlan forgets about all the complications, all the strange creatures behind him, and doesn't even look at the infuriated Shen Wei anymore.

He walks forward, guided by instinct, the Guardian Order Token he's carrying in his inside pocket burning with increasing heat against his chest.

"Guardian... Lord Guardian?"

Zhao Yunlan is startled by the judge pulling him back, and breaks out of his trance. He turns around, still confused.

Without him realising, the group has reached a plain covered in untrodden snow. On the side are giant boulders, each taller than an average person, arranged in a 64-hexagram array. Tiny whirlwinds occasionally pass through; but the atmosphere of silence is almost solemn.

The judge continues cautiously, "Beyond this is the entrance to Mount Kunlun; Lord Guardian, would you please lead the way?"

Though Zhao Yunlan can't see Shen Wei's face, he feels his gaze. But when he tries to find it, Shen Wei turns around as though he doesn't care.

Zhao Yunlan smiles miserably, and gives Da Qing a pat on the butt so the cat has to jump off his shoulder. He takes out the Guardian Order Token, and walks into the giant rock array.

With every step he treads, everyone in the crowd holds their breaths, and the wind stops blowing as he reaches the centre of the boulders. He's left behind a long trail of footprints, appearing lonely and peaceful.

He shuts his eyes, his profile utterly calm, and listens to the echo of boundless mountain ranges.

North of the Scarlet River, a pillar connects sky and earth; the great hill of nine thousand slopes is the birthplace of gods.

The top of the colossal peak, overlooking the vast plains to the sea and beyond, is the origin of all mountains and rivers, the fabric of the world and all things in it.

This is Kunlun.¹¹¹

No-one is telling him what to do, nor has he asked anyone—and yet Zhao Yunlan simply knows, as if a voice in his heart is guiding his every move. He opens his eyes, and glances at the giant boulders which revolve around him, directed by his mind; they orbit around him like stars, unpredictable, and too intricate to follow.

Finally, some people begin chattering, wondering who's inside the stone circle. Shen Wei ignores it all, and only looks at one person.

Though he's wearing an unfashionable jacket and hiking shoes, his short hair blown into a messy bird's nest, in Shen Wei's eyes, this figure miraculously fuses with that in the long green gown from years and years ago.

He begins to lose control; dark mist oozes from his sleeves, engulfing Zhao Yunlan and blocking out everyone else, as if they're the only two left in the world.

Suddenly, Shen Wei laughs mirthlessly at himself. A few thousand years ago, all he wanted was for the other person to look at him; he would have died for him, and yet he feared that he was unworthy and too filthy to look upon. Now his greed overflows, wanting to have him all for himself, not wanting others to even lay an eye on him.

Without him noticing, centuries ago a seed had been sown, and it sprouted and spread within him into an unshakeable obsession.

Perhaps it's his nature, perhaps it's instinct, but Shen Wei has been fighting against it since he was born, and yet, one chance encounter has sent him spiralling, without hope of escape.

The earth trembles; a thundering echo comes from far away up in Mount Kunlun. Lightning cuts through thick clouds, striking the earth. On top of the mountain, an eerie mask flashes and flickers. It seems to be the Ghost Face, standing up above and glaring coldly downwards.

With a tremendous rumble, the array of boulders sinks into the earth, and in an instant, the group is brought to the peak of Mount Kunlun, the Forbidden Place unreachable for anyone but the gods.

Most have yet to find their balance, and the cat in Zhao Yunlan's arms screeches; the group follows the cat's gaze towards the Holy Tree, which has lived as long as the universe. The entwined branches are already half withered; no leaves, no flowers, vital energy fading.

The black cat breaks free of Zhao Yunlan's embrace. The instant his paws touch the ground, his body abruptly elongates, transforming into a human.

Zhao Yunlan never knew that Da Qing could transform. He flinches in shock: the man before him has long black hair flowing down his back and a pair of cat eyes sparkling like precious gems, dazzling with a cold light. But he still sounds like the Da Qing Zhao Yunlan remembers.

He says in a deep voice, "Who dares desecrate Mount Kunlun?"

Da Qing stares at the withering tree, his eyes reddening with tears.

At this moment, countless demon beasts rise out of the ground, absorbing energy from the roots of the Holy Tree. Suddenly, the soil cracks open, and they rush forth in a giant horde, screeching and wailing.

A violent gale whips past as the Ghost Face's gigantic head emerges from the thick clouds, a thousand metres long, covering the sun and the sky, grinning devilishly.

Then, his mountainous limbs flicker in the darkness of the clouds that always surround the summit of Mount Kunlun. One of his hands is clenched, and the other is hidden behind his back. A huge cauldron is floating behind him, as tall as a multistorey building, and rotating rapidly. It stirs up howling winds that blast the ears to the point of agony.

Someone screams in fear, "Soul Cauldron! It's a Soul Cauldron ¹¹²!"

The Ghost Face's hand suddenly appears again from behind his back without a sound; he's swinging an enormous axe, and then lets it ruthlessly slash straight down.

Zhao Yunlan is pushed aside, almost losing his balance. He staggers a bit before finding his feet again. A blood-scented cyclone is whirling in front of him and he struggles to open his eyes. The axe strikes down with the weight of a mountain, but is stopped by a thick blade only three feet long.

The Ghost Slayer is like an ant holding up a giant boulder. A vicious gust rips his sleeve, revealing his pale, thin hands. Then, with a slight crack, the Ghost Slayer's wrist twists, leaving a fracture in the giant axe.

He adds another swing, and with a resonating clang, the giant axe is swung away as more and more cracks spread from the small fracture. The axe falls to the ground, creating a hundred-metre-long abyss on the peak of the snowbound hill. Numerous demon beasts perish in it under their own master's axe.

After the first round of this petrifying duel, the Ghost Slayer says in a low voice, "A Soul Cauldron! You're out of your mind."

Chapter 73

The Ghost Face finally speaks. "I'm not. You have the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, and so be it; you'll bring it to me eventually. But I must have the Ink Brush of Virtue. If two of the four pillars holding up the sky collapse, no-one will be able to stop me." Then, his dark gaze scans the crowd. "I see you brought company. Are they afraid you might switch sides?"

His words come out like a slap across the face for almost everyone present.

The Ghost Face looks around and sees Zhao Yunlan; his smile grows ever stranger. "Oh, the Guardian is here as well, no wonder."

Da Qing is about to step forward with a cold face, but Zhao Yunlan grabs his long hair mid-stride and pulls him back.

Putting on a false smile, he twists one hand in Da Qing's hair to lock him in place, while he sticks his other hand into his pocket to search for a cigarette.

Even in human form, Da Qing still has cat instincts; he turns around and claws at Zhao Yunlan. But without claws, it's harmless and only leaves some pale tracks. Zhao Yunlan's hand is cold enough to make him flinch.

"Don't give me trouble, fat fuck." Zhao Yunlan even dares continue to use his insulting nickname for this immortal person.

Da Qing says, "What's wrong with you?"

Zhao Yunlan's eyes are shining brightly while he blows a ring of smoke from pale and bloodless lips. Fidgeting with the cigarette, he whispers, "I'm a little nervous."

Da Qing's eyes widen.

Zhao Yunlan glances towards the sides. "The Crows are with the Underworld, the other shifters with their own tribes, there are the Arhats¹¹³ of the West, and who are those guys over there, Taoists?"

After the Ghost Face's earth-shattering axe crumbled, the crowd has naturally divided into separate groups.

"Some are sages, some have transcended and are working for Heaven," Da Qing says. "But none of them have what it takes to meddle with these two; without you, they couldn't even get up here. Apart from these two, the only one who'd dare start a fight here is the snake-bodied one."

The face of a person, the body of a snake: that would be the ancient goddess and almighty empress, Nüwa.

Snowflakes start to float out of the gloomy sky. Hideous demon beasts, angels, and ghosts from all places confront each other, on the verge of battle.

Da Qing avoids looking at the Holy Tree, barely managing to keep himself calm. He says to Zhao Yunlan, "You better stand back."

Snow falls on Zhao Yunlan's cigarette. He takes out a tissue, wraps it up and stuffs it in his pocket in an eco-friendly fashion. Following Da Qing's advice, he retreats from the confrontation. Walking past everyone else, he goes straight to the Holy Tree and puts his hand on the ice-cold withered trunk.

It's hard to tell how tall the Holy Tree is, but its roots protrude from the earth all the way up to Zhao Yunlan's chest level; the tree itself is like a deity.

"I don't know anything," Zhao Yunlan says in his mind, "but you recognise me, right?"

All of a sudden, a verdant sprout springs out of the tree trunk, slowly curling like a strand of hair, and gently wrapping around his finger.

Zhao Yunlan holds on tight to the straps of his small backpack and smiles faintly. "Then I'll give this a try."

At this moment, the Ghost Face reaches for the huge Soul Cauldron and holds it in his palms. It's so large, it seems to stretch across the whole sky. A dark smoky substance foams over the lip of the cauldron, contrasting against his pale fingers.

"The Ancient Tree of Virtue... a body not yet lived but dead," Zhao Yunlan hears the Ghost Face mumble, "Does the Guardian know what the Ink Brush of Virtue really is?"

Zhao Yunlan turns around, leans back against the Holy Tree, and looks up to the Ghost Face from afar. "Let's hear it."

"Before the Yan and Yellow Emperors battled Chiyou, conflicts among deities were common. Fuxi and Nüwa wanted to establish order, so they went up to Mount Kunlun, and obtained a branch from the Holy Tree. Nüwa remembered that she created humans carrying the three eternal evils from the soil, and so she took it upon herself to plant the branch in the Profane Lands..."

The Ghost Slayer roars, "Shut up!"

Black smoke suddenly rises around his whole body, the Soul Slashing Blade in his hands lengthening and lengthening, like the Monkey King's legendary Gold Hoop Stick; only the handle remains the same size, supporting the colossal weight of the immense blade.

The Soul Slashing Blade seems to touch the sky, whipping up a violent thunderstorm, as if it had pierced the sky to make thunder

and lightning crash down, striking towards the Ghost Face's head.

With bellowing laughter, the Ghost Face simply lifts his head, opens his mouth and swallows the lightning. The Soul Slashing Blade comes crashing down immediately, aiming for the Soul Cauldron in his hand and all the way towards his chest. A cutting wind whips up around it, spraying hailstones the size of fists everywhere. A mass of demon beasts pounce forward.

In this pitch black place on top of Mount Kunlun, the battle of many Gods and demons is under way.

Zhao Yunlan struggles to keep his balance for a long time, until he gives up and sits down on the bulging roots of the Holy Tree. There's nothing to do amidst the chaos, so he lights another cigarette. He finally understands the Ghost Slayer's dilemma: the Ghost Face doesn't treat him as an enemy, others don't treat him as an ally... the fact is, nobody else is on their level. Here they're finally showing their true powers. Last time under the Awl of Mountains and Rivers, if it hadn't been for the Ghost Face holding back, it wouldn't have been that easy to end the fight.

The Ghost Face doesn't seem to want a real fight with the Ghost Slayer.

"The Profane Lands?" Zhao Yunlan repeats under his breath. The Ghost Face has succinctly answered all his questions: legend says that humans are born with three evils: greed, hatred and ignorance, also called the Three Corpses¹¹⁴. And that book said that the three eternal evils come from the soil, so the Profane Lands are probably the origin of 'greed, hatred and ignorance'.

The Ghost Face springs up, dodging the Soul Slashing Blade. It cleaves the ground, making the whole of Mount Kunlun tremble. He continues, "The Holy Tree showed clemency. It withered and died, and then sprouted again and became the legendary Ancient Tree of

Virtue. Then, after the battle between Chiyou and the two emperors..."

"Shut up! Shut up!" The Ghost Slayer's blade slashes towards him again. Zhao Yunlan cannot see where Shen Wei is standing, and cannot imagine how he's wielding a hundred-metre-long blade with ease.

With a slash to his waist, the Ghost Face's words are once again cut short; his body shrinks to half its height and the Soul Slashing Blade barely misses his head. With a thud, the Soul Cauldron crashes to the ground, and countless voices instantly call out its name.

An endless procession of demon beasts spawns from the Soul Cauldron.

Zhao Yunlan stares at the Soul Cauldron, but he seems neither indignant nor agitated. He doesn't even turn around when he notices someone approaching from behind.

Da Qing is a lot less calm. He pounces down from the tree with a dagger in his hand, like hiding cat claws in his paws, dashing towards that someone like a phantom.

The Ghost Face lifts a hand, and is promptly stabbed by Da Qing. But his wrist is like steel, and with a clang, he deflects the Soul Slashing Blade and sends it flying. He reaches out to grab Da Qing by the neck, but even after his transformation, Da Qing is still as agile as in cat form. He bounces back and onto the Holy Tree with two back flips, where he hunkers down and glares at the Ghost Face like a tiger watching his prey.

"Think about who the owner is before you try to hit a cat," Zhao Yunlan finally says. He pauses, smoothing his smile into an indifferent expression as he slowly turns towards the Ghost Face. He shoots the Ghost Face an unimpressed look, then laughs suddenly.

"You only made it up here because of the soul fire on my shoulder, do you really think this is your territory?"

That phrase works better than a hail of bullets. The arrogant Ghost Face stops in his tracks, three metres from Zhao Yunlan, and dares not approach further.

Shen Wei, who's rushing over in a hurry, hears it too, and is frozen in shock.

"After the battle between the Yan and Yellow Emperors and Chiyou, the Three Sovereigns couldn't bear to see the world in that state, so they crafted the Ink Brush of Virtue from the Ancient Tree of Virtue. All things in the world have spirits, and the Ink Brush of Virtue records all deeds, good and bad." Zhao Yunlan takes his time, facing the Ghost Face's mask and blowing a ring of smoke at him. "Then the Ink Brush of Virtue, as one of the Four Mystical Artefacts, was sealed away as Nüwa repaired the sky and turned the four legs of the Ao into the four sky pillars. The Sundial of Reincarnation was left on earth, the Awl of Mountains and Rivers was buried underground, the Ink Brush of Virtue..."

Zhao Yunlan's lips curl up slightly, as he lets his gaze travel towards the other side. "The Ink Brush of Virtue shattered into countless pieces, and landed on every living soul on earth... is that right, honourable judge?"

The figure that has been hiding behind the Holy Tree slinks forward and kneels on the ground, head against the soil, trembling. "I really had no choice but to conceal the truth. Please forgive my dishonesty, Lord Kunlun."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't look at the judge any longer, and only sighs. "Perhaps the judge is a kind soul and not very good at lying... let me tell you, the key to lying is to get the details right. What you said to me last night was nothing but a load of nonsense, anyone could see right through it! Human souls came with Nüwa's creation, so how

can the shattered pieces of the Ink Brush of Virtue be human souls? A soul from every living person to form the Ink Brush of Virtue? I wouldn't be able to do that, none of us here would be able to do that, wouldn't you say? I'm afraid many who came here today were tricked by your little story?"

The judge is shaking like a leaf.

At this moment, the huge Soul Cauldron that everyone has been fighting over trembles, and all of Mount Kunlun with it. The Holy Tree behind Zhao Yunlan suddenly sprouts countless buds, and with a gurgling sound, a few blossoms grow on the long-dead branches in that desolate, snow-covered place.

Zhao Yunlan leans lazily against the tree trunk, seemingly unmoved by this commotion, and speaks into the silence after the quake, "Since I am Kunlun, the Ink Brush of Virtue belongs to me, so why don't you return it to its rightful owner?"

The mask the Ghost Face is wearing twists and deforms. Zhao Yunlan looks at him lazily, picks something up with a tissue, wet from the snow, flicks away some ashes, and then drops a bomb: "Don't play tricks with me, I know what you look like."

Feeling the person next to him stiffen, Zhao Yunlan lowers his voice to explain, "Looks are just an illusion; do you really think I can't tell the difference?"

Before the Ghost Slayer can open his mouth to reply, a giant storm whips up on Mount Kunlun, blowing even stronger than during the duel before. Da Qing is almost blown off the tree; he transforms into a cat and hangs on to the branch with his claws. The Ghost Slayer and the Ghost Face are seemingly unaffected, and Zhao Yunlan manages to stay upright because he has the Holy Tree for cover, but everyone else is swept off their feet.

The judge, who was already kneeling, is thrown face-first into the muddy snow, those fighting mid-air are sent crashing down, those who were trying to flee into the earth are dug back up; numerous demon beasts are whipped into the cyclone threatening to suck everyone in.

In the eye of the cyclone, the vague flickering form of a gigantic ink brush appears: it's the Ink Brush of Virtue!

The Soul Cauldron shatters instantly, and the Ink Brush of Virtue is whole again.

And yet Zhao Yunlan, Shen Wei and the Ghost Face aren't moving at all, as if that giant ink brush they've all been after suddenly doesn't matter anymore.

The Ghost Face asks, "Since the Guard... Mountain God must have it, why don't you go get it?"

Even buffeted by the volatile gusts, Zhao Yunlan manages to look unruffled, and says meaningfully, "I'm afraid someone might try to take advantage."

The judge's head stays low, and he doesn't dare utter a word.

The Ghost Face sighs. "We owe you one for the fire, I really don't want to do this."

He whistles, and a horde of demon beasts rise up from the ground, surrounding the group of people. The Ghost Slayer immediately comes to stand beside Zhao Yunlan, blade in hand.

"Oh," Zhao Yunlan says coldly. "So my tree has worms in it."

After those words, he shoots something from his hand, some kind of strong acid that sprays all over the ground. The demon beasts that just emerged from the ground let out inhuman wails; the judge pales,

looking like a breeze could blow him over. He quickly retreats, shouting, "Brew of Five Blacks! It's... it's Brew of Five Blacks!"

Brew of Five Blacks is made from the blood of five black animals: dog, cat, mule, pig and chicken. They all have to be born at a dark hour of a dark month, with black innards and completely black fur. Not particularly precious but *particular* and hard to obtain. It's a secret recipe that can restrain denizens of the Underworld.

It's self-evident for whom this was prepared originally.

Before anyone can make a move, the Ink Brush of Virtue shrinks and flies into the Holy Tree. Everyone stares as it sinks into the tree trunk.

Nobody could have foreseen this turn of events. The Ghost Face swats the judge, sending him flying, and reaches for the Holy Tree. Zhao Yunlan blocks his hand.

The Ghost Face's arm is so hard that Zhao Yunlan feels like he hit a reinforced steel bar; he doesn't need to check under his sleeve to know his wrist must be black and blue.

But he doesn't let anything show, and the Ghost Face doesn't seem to want to deal with him head-on; he changes tack, slipping past Zhao Yunlan's side to touch the Holy Tree.

There's a sharp grinding sound, and the big tree bounces against the Ghost Face's hand with such force that two of his iron-hard fingernails break off, dripping with black blood.

Zhao Yunlan sticks his hands in his pockets and makes a face like he knew that was coming. All smiles, he says, "I blocked you because I was afraid your hand would get hurt, but you really can't tell good from evil, can you?"

The Ghost Face gnashes his teeth, then vanishes into a cloud of black smoke. He fails to take his minions away. They keep advancing on Zhao Yunlan, but every single one is quickly beheaded by the Soul Slashing Blade.

Zhao Yunlan lets out a sigh of relief, and gives a sly grin. Then, he touches the tree trunk of the Holy Tree, and feels a force pulling him in.

What a great tree, Zhao Yunlan thinks to himself, pleasantly surprised.

"You..." Shen Wei's hood was blown away when the Ink Brush of Virtue appeared, and even the dark mist that usually shrouds his figure has dissipated. The familiar face shows complex emotions: hope, worry, and a little cautious tension. "You remember everything?"

"Of course it was all bullshit, you idiots, so gullible." Zhao Yunlan winks, and flicks his wrist. "Oh fuck me, that hurts like hell, that Ghost Face kid is hard as diamonds."¹¹⁵

Shen Wei is speechless.

His heart, in his throat a moment ago, crashes back down, painfully beating against his chest.

Zhao Yunlan says, "Take my place here and stall them. The Holy Tree is calling, I have to go take a look. Even better if I can get the Ink Brush of Virtue."

He jumps into the Holy Tree. When half of his body is already submerged, he thinks of something. Turning his head towards Shen Wei, he says, "Whoever gets back home first leaves the lights on and the door unlocked. Love you."

With these words, he disappears into the Holy Tree.

Chapter 74

With the Ghost Face gone, Shen Wei proceeds to clean up the peak of Mount Kunlun, ridding it of the demon beast infestation. Soon, most of the crowd that the judge brought along has left. Only Ox-Head and Horse-Face are left; they're helping the judge get back up. He seems to have something to say, but doesn't dare approach. Shen Wei lifts a hand towards Da Qing and says, "Come, I'll take you back."

Da Qing jumps onto his shoulder. Shen Wei has roughly the same build as Zhao Yunlan, his shoulders aren't narrower than Zhao Yunlan's. Yet standing on the Ghost Slayer's shoulder seems awkward nonetheless, so he curls up into a black ball, holding on to Shen Wei's clothes with his claws.

By then, the judge seems to have gathered his courage and starts, "Your Honour..."

Shen Wei puts his blade away but keeps moving. He only says with a bland expression, "Run off, don't make me curse."

The sky finally brightens, shining with belated rays.

When Shen Wei returns to Zhao Yunlan's small apartment, it's already past noon. Every TV channel is reporting the morning's anomalies, inviting all sorts of experts to prate about what happened.

But Shen Wei is only doing one thing: waiting by the door.

Literally. He moves a small armchair to face the door, and then just sits there, motionless.

Da Qing quietly crouches at the window like a cat statue, feigning non-existence.

Some three, four hours later, the sun is almost gone, when Shen Wei's phone finally vibrates.

He doesn't even react at first. When he finally picks it up and looks at it, it's as if he's coming back to life.

There are three messages in a row.

"Finally got a signal. I'm fine, I'll be back soon."

One minute later. "Shit, my boss is calling me, there's a dinner gathering. Don't wait for me."

Another minute later. "Go to bed early, be good."

Da Qing jumps off the window sill, circles the armchair half-way, and finally gathers up the courage to ask, most politely, "Your Honour, if I may ask, was that the Guardian?"

Shen Wei nods. "He's got something to do, so he'll be back later tonight."

Da Qing sighs, hesitates, and then says, "Then.... then I shall head back to No. 4 Bright Avenue."

Shen Wei looks down at him, and Da Qing instinctively drops his gaze... he doesn't seem to remember going "Professor Shen this", "Professor Shen that" all the time.

Shen Wei nods. "Take care."

With great relief, Da Qing opens the door and skedaddles. Sharing a room with the Ghost Slayer is no joke; if it weren't for the douchebag Zhao Yunlan, he wouldn't have left a whole fridge of dried fish snacks uneaten and come here to suffer.

~~~

Zhao Yunlan isn't going to any sort of gathering. He isn't going anywhere really. After he sends the messages, he begins aimlessly wandering the streets of Dragon City.

Usually the winters are dry, but for some reason this winter is exceptionally snowy and foggy. The ground is covered in a thin layer of sleet; occasionally, a car drives by slowly and cautiously. Most of the small roadside shops are already closed, and there are only a few pedestrians; it all seems somewhat desolate.

He looks lost and he doesn't seem to know where to go. Streaks of blood reach for his irises, and he appears pale and haggard.

Some time later, his phone rings. Zhao Yunlan answers with a hoarse voice. "Hey, dad."

"Hm," a voice replies at the other end. "How come I couldn't reach you earlier?"

Zhao Yunlan doesn't know what to answer. He's standing on the side of the road, where the wind blows quite strongly. Dry and cold gusts make his eyes redden. After a few seconds, he answers sheepishly, "No signal perhaps."

Zhao Yunlan's father asks, "Where are you now?"

He doesn't know either. After looking around for a road sign, he communicates his whereabouts.

His father says, "Wait there, I'll come pick you up."

Zhao Yunlan crouches on the side of the road, waiting. About twenty minutes later, a car stops beside him. The driver looks at him with disdain. "Why do you look like a beggar? Get in the car."

Zhao Yunlan throws him a scowl, stomps his numb feet, and gets into the car. Like a dying dog, he plants his butt on the seat next to the driver, arms crossed against his chest, shoulders hunched, clearly telegraphing the message, 'I don't want to talk to you or answer any questions'.

His father begins driving, and glances at him. "Where did you go, and why are you dressed like this?"

"Tibetan Plateau," Zhao Yunlan says blandly.

"What were you doing there?"

"Helped capture some nefarious poachers in the Kekexili reserve."

Zhao Yunlan's father says, "Bullshit."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't say anything.

After a moment of silence, Zhao Yunlan's father says, "Your mum told me two days ago. I couldn't figure out what to say to you, so I didn't come and find you sooner."

Zhao Yunlan gives him a tired look.

"When you were young, that was around the time when my career took off. I was busier than ever. Back then it was always your mum taking care of you, and I never really did anything, but I never thought much of it. Not until you started going to school, and your mum dragged me to the school's parents club. Only then did I realise, after spending my free weekends chatting with teachers and other parents, that you're different from all the other kids."

Zhao Yunlan smiles bitterly. "Not just different, evidently your son's a freak... alright, dad, let's find some other time to talk. I really don't feel like it today."

Zhao Yunlan's father looks at him quietly. "I think I've spoilt you.... Did I say anything when you came up with the outrageous idea of starting up a Special Investigations Unit? I even helped you pull some strings. Don't push it too far."

Zhao Yunlan sits quietly for a moment. "Alright, what do you wanna ask?"

"I know I'm old-fashioned, but I have to ask, can you break up with that professor?"

"No," Zhao Yunlan says, steely and resolute.

"I'm not fighting with you, we can discuss this calmly." Zhao Yunlan's father frowns. "Tell me, what do you like about him? What about him is irreplaceable? How is he worth bearing the social stigma, and the fact that you can't be together legally? Does it have to be him?"

"Mum isn't as beautiful as Zhiling<sup>116</sup>, why did you give up the entire forest for a tree?" Zhao Yunlan says impatiently, then humphs unpleasantly. "What do I care about stigma, and what does 'legally' mean, anyway? If I want, I can make my own wedding certificate. On University Street, I can buy all kinds of official seals carved into radishes, five dollars each, what's the big deal?"

"I'm discussing this with you calmly; what kind of attitude is that?"

"Sorry..." Zhao Yunlan sits silently for a while, looks down, and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Perhaps one day, when your hormonal levels are back to normal, you'll regret this decision." Zhao Yunlan's father maintains a calm and dignified tone. It makes one relax; nobody would call him intimidating. On the contrary, it's much easier to persuade someone this way. He says, "Passion is attractive; I've been young, I know that feeling. But I don't approve at all of love that's too difficult. Do you know why?"

Zhao Yunlan doesn't reply.

"Have you read 'Anna Karenina'?" Zhao Yunlan's father is driving slowly along the empty streets. "Why did Anna die in the end? Of course, you could argue that her love affair is immoral and your relationship isn't. And I'd agree. But there's still a similarity... love is strong yet frail; perhaps in the face of adversity, it can rise up with great power, transcending into a sort of exemplary ardour, and that's why it's been praised since ancient times. But you have to remember the saying: 'It isn't the mountain ahead that wears you out; it's the grain of sand in your shoe'."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't make a sound.

Zhao Yunlan's father sighs. "Difficult love can be borne with perseverance and grit. But love always fades eventually, have you thought of that? When the passion is gone, you won't recall the pleasant and exciting memories when you look at each other. You'll only remember how difficult your time together was. How will you see him when that time comes? And how will he see you? Have you thought of that? Everyone's the same; don't think you're the exception. Do you remember the ice cream shop that you really liked as a kid?"

Zhao Yunlan shakes his head slowly.

"Your mum thought it was bad for your health, so she didn't let you eat any junk food. You were obsessed with it all day, and even went on a hunger strike. Then I came up with an idea... I took you to get ice cream three times a day, and you'd eat at least two big bowls every time. Even when you got an upset stomach, I still took you there for another month. Afterwards, whenever I mentioned the ice cream shop again, you'd cry and cling to the doorjamb, refusing to go."

Zhao Yunlan's lips very reluctantly curl up into a smile. Zhao Yunlan's father says calmly, "Think again. Can you really keep going like this with that professor?"

When he speaks reasonably like this, nobody can turn a deaf ear. Zhao Yunlan pauses for a moment before he replies. His throat still feels incredibly rough; he grabs a bottle of water, drinks half of it, and then says slowly, "I've known Shen Wei for a very long time, ever since I first started working; it's been quite a few years now. Dad, I know what you mean, but there are some people in this world, regardless of attraction, allure<sup>117</sup>, obsession, or mere lust, if you don't treat them right, then you'll feel like a worthless prick."

Zhao Yunlan's father turns to look at him. Zhao Yunlan leans on the seat, eyes half closed. Perhaps due to his sleep-deprived state, his double eyelids almost look three-fold, making him look even more tired.

His father remains silent for a long time. Then he says reluctantly, "All right, you're an adult now, some things aren't for me to interfere. If you really believe that, then I don't have more to say... when I'm free and at home, you can bring him over for a meal."

"Thanks." Zhao Yunlan doesn't seem relieved or happy. He keeps wearing the same frown. After a while, he says hesitantly, "Dad, let's have a few drinks?"

Zhao Yunlan's father shoots him a look. He turns the car around and takes him to a restaurant run by locals, small and relatively quiet. Pushing the drinks menu in front of Zhao Yunlan, he says, "Go on and order something, my treat."

Then he nods to the waiter. "Give me a pot of Iron Goddess Tea."

Son and father sit across from each other, noticeably alike in air and appearance. One downing tea, one downing alcohol; neither making

any sound, neither disturbing the other.

Intoxication never shows on Zhao Yunlan's face: the more he drinks, the paler he looks. When there are two empty bottles standing in front of him, his father stops him and calls the waiter. "Bring him a cup of honey water. You can drink a little when you're feeling down, but I'm your dad, I've got to keep an eye on you. I can't let you ruin your stomach or get alcohol poisoning."

Zhao Yunlan hesitates and says, "I haven't eaten. I'll have some fried rice."

"So can you tell me what's going on with you? Got in a fight with your professor?" his father asks.

"Of course not." Zhao Yunlan smiles uneasily. "I'm way past the age of throwing temper tantrums over trivial things."

"Then what is it?"

For a while, Zhao Yunlan says nothing. His eyes are staring at the marble tabletop, as if searching for some pattern amongst the irregular veins. When his food and drink arrive, his gaze wavers and he lowers his head. "There's so much going on, I can't figure out if I'm right or wrong. What should I do?"

Zhao Yunlan's father lights a cigarette and stays silent for a while before replying, "I can only tell you about my own experience. All these years have made me realise there are four things in life you can't get too bogged down in: forever, right or wrong, good or evil, and life or death."

Zhao Yunlan lifts his eyes to look up at him.

"Dedication can sometimes be a virtue. But if you insist too much on having 'forever', your focus on longterm results can easily make you lose sight of the road under your feet. If you insist too much on being



right, it's easy to end up splitting hairs<sup>118</sup>, since most things just aren't black or white. If you insist too much on being good, you'll become conceited and narrow-minded<sup>119</sup>, and you might try to change the rules to suit your values. If you insist too much on staying alive, you'll dwell on the insignificant and will just be living a second-rate life."

Zhao Yunlan listens in silence.

"There are just some things that ought not to be questioned, ought not to be dwelled upon. They're certainly not worth troubling yourself over. What's done is done, whether it was right or wrong doesn't matter. It's better to look forward, don't you think?"

Once Zhao Yunlan has heard his words, he immediately downs the whole cup of honey water and then says calmly, "I've lost my appetite. I need to throw up. After that, just drive me home."

Zhao Yunlan's father drives him to his place, but stops before going upstairs. "That professor is at yours, right? You didn't expect me, and I don't want to drop in unannounced. You go on up by yourself. We'll meet some other time."

His back already turned, Zhao Yunlan gives a little wave and plods up the stairs.

Shen Wei has been waiting by the door for a long time. When he hears the sound of a key, he flings the door open even before the lock turns. Zhao Yunlan still looks fairly sober, but he stinks of alcohol. He trips on the doorsill, and Shen Wei quickly reaches out to steady him. "How much did you drink?"

"I'm fine." Zhao Yunlan leans against him for a bit, letting his forehead rest on Shen Wei's shoulder. After a while, he smiles. "I'm gonna take a shower... anything to eat?"

Shen Wei is speechless.

Regarding Zhao Yunlan's heedless decision to climb Mount Kunlun, Shen Wei has quite a few bones to pick with him. Yet when he sees how pitiful he looks holding his stomach, none of it comes out of his mouth. Finally, he only sighs. "I'll heat you up some dumplings."

Zhao Yunlan pecks him on the neck quickly, then he extracts himself from the embrace and takes out a small, thin wooden box. He hands it to Shen Wei with the words, "It's a gift," and heads for the bathroom.

Shen Wei opens the box, and inside he finds a slender ink brush: its handle made of wood, the tip made from some unknown kind of hair with a surprising golden shimmer. It feels astonishingly heavy in his hand, sparkling luxuriously yet possessing understated elegance.

Undoubtedly, this is the legendary Ink Brush of Virtue.

Shen Wei is mesmerised. At that moment, he hears a loud bang from the bathroom over the sound of running water.

Startled, Shen Wei quickly puts the Mystical Artefact away and knocks on the door. "Yunlan, are you alright?"

Zhao Yunlan's bathroom features a bathtub equipped with a shower head. When he has time, he can take a bath, and when he's in a hurry, he can just take a quick shower.

Zhao Yunlan has accidentally turned the temperature up too high. He was only mildly drunk before, but the steam has suddenly made the alcohol go to his head after all. The bathtub is very slippery under his bare feet, and he trips and falls into it head first, almost giving himself a concussion.

Twinkling stars are all he sees; he doesn't hear Shen Wei's voice at all.

With no response, Shen Wei can't help but push open the bathroom door.

## Chapter 75

Nobody wears clothes in the shower.

Zhao Yunlan, dizzy from his fall, finds himself lying in the bathtub. Hot water is beating down on his body and pelting his head, making him disoriented. He grabs the edges of the bathtub with both hands and struggles to get up. His hunched back outlines his strong shoulder blades, the smooth lineation of his muscles curving narrowly downwards towards his waist and forming a highly alluring shape; below that... Shen Wei doesn't dare look any lower. The mere sight of the wrists flushed red from the hot water is an assault on his eyes.

The bathroom is too hot for Shen Wei. In mere seconds, he feels like he's being cooked.

He hastily grabs a large towel and is about to hurl it over Zhao Yunlan when he realises the water is still running, and so he frantically turns off the tap. In an attempt at propriety, he averts his eyes, and with stretched-out arms wraps Zhao Yunlan in the towel. The thick towel between them, he carefully carries Zhao Yunlan out of the bathroom, blushing to his ears.

Fortunately, Zhao Yunlan doesn't add insult to injury<sup>120</sup> with his trademark shamelessness; in fact, he gives no response whatsoever. His brain has been reduced to a puddle by alcohol and steaming hot water.

Zhao Yunlan's body heat is rapidly seeping through the towel, which still covers most of him, but Shen Wei can make out the shape of his long, bare legs. Shen Wei listens to the pulse pounding in his temples while gently lowering Zhao Yunlan onto the bed. Zhao Yunlan is curled up into a ball and holding his head.

As if he had touched a hot frying pan, Shen Wei quickly retracts his hands and stands aside helplessly, fidgeting.

Only when Shen Wei sees the growing water stain on the pillow does he come to. He first pulls up the blanket over Zhao Yunlan, then pulls at a corner of the towel, carefully trying to extract it from beneath the blanket.

But at this moment, Zhao Yunlan suddenly catches his hand.

His palm is warm and damp, and his grip is surprisingly strong for a drunk person. He opens his eyes a little, but they don't seem to be able to focus. His gaze is even more scattered than during those few days when he was blind, and his cheeks are flushing crimson.

Heat flares up in Shen Wei's throat. He swallows dry.

Zhao Yunlan opens his mouth and mumbles something inaudible. Shen Wei bends down close to his mouth. "What did you say?"

Zhao Yunlan's grasp tightens. This time, Shen Wei hears him clearly.

He keeps repeating in a low voice, "Sorry... I'm sorry..."

Shen Wei flinches.

Zhao Yunlan's grasp tightens to the point of pain.

Shen Wei sits down on the edge of the bed and, with the blanket still wrapped tightly around Zhao Yunlan, carefully reaches around him and lightly pats him on the back. "What are you sorry for?"

Zhao Yunlan turns over and wraps his arms around Shen Wei's hip, revealing his bare torso. Shen Wei freezes, his hand awkwardly hovering in mid-air, as if he had turned into a statue. The veins on his forehead are starting to pop out.

It takes him a while to realise that Zhao Yunlan is shivering all over.

Shen Wei tries to gently detach himself, intending to raise Zhao Yunlan's head to look at his face, but Zhao Yunlan tightens his embrace in a deadlock, and Shen Wei realises that his own clothes are getting wet. He lifts up Zhao Yunlan's chin, and even though there are no tear stains on his face, his eyes are deep red. "You..."

If Zhao Yunlan weren't quite so drunk, he could perhaps still put on a pretence. But now he's genuinely intoxicated, and only half-conscious after his fall; he probably doesn't even know what he's saying. All he does is unwittingly repeat the same phrase: "I'm sorry."

A fire burns bright in Shen Wei's heart. All the lakes and rivers of the world couldn't extinguish this blazing flame.

His palm finally comes to rest on Zhao Yunlan's naked back, slow but steady. The warmth radiating from every single inch of Zhao Yunlan's skin is enticing. Shen Wei's voice turns hoarse as his eyes go dark. He whispers into Zhao Yunlan's ear, "You're the only person in the world who doesn't have to apologise to me."

Zhao Yunlan shakes his head. He shuts his eyes tightly, and a teardrop emerges on his eyelashes. He wants to cry his heart out, there's no other way to vent his sorrow. Yet he doesn't have the strength to do so. He's losing the strength to speak, even. In the thirty years of his life, he has never experienced such profound distress... and Shen Wei has never seen him in tears. Although Shen Wei has secretly kept watch over him for all these years, at that moment he's almost overwhelmed inside.

Shen Wei lowers his head and kisses Zhao Yunlan's eyes with utmost care. He savours the slightly salty flavour and says, "You gave me my life, you gave me my eyes, you gave me my everything... what do you have to be sorry for?"

"If I'd known..." Zhao Yunlan mutters almost inaudibly. "If I'd known, I'd rather have killed you then..."

He doesn't go on. Letting go of the crumpled blanket, Shen Wei enfolds Zhao Yunlan in his arms and pushes him onto the bed, his arms bracketing Zhao Yunlan. He seems to be catching his breath, his chest heaving. After a long while, he whispers, "Kunlun, is it you?"

Zhao Yunlan looks up at him, a tear trickling down from the corner of his eye. He shuts his eyes, and the skin all around them is red, making him look utterly dejected. His lips are trembling for a long time, but in the end he still has nothing else to say and can only repeat again: "I'm sorry."

"It has been five thousand years, up above and down below. Is that all you have to say to me?" Shen Wei asks. After a while, he sighs. "During the Sundial case, do you remember what I said to Li Qian? I said, there are only two things worth dying for: first, your country and the world, and that is for the sake of the people; second, for your soulmate, and that is for the sake of yourself. People have found love worth dying for ever since the beginning of time. If I can die for you, then of course I can live for you. I have no regrets. You have never cried before. Don't cry for me."

Then, Shen Wei gently strokes Zhao Yunlan's face with the back of his hand. "Some things are better kept inside than said out loud. But keeping them in for too long starts to become suffocating. They all want Lord Kunlun to come back. In my selfish heart, I want that too, actually. You're quick-witted, so there's no point in beating around the bush... I'd better just say it: those who make sacrifices, no matter how willingly, and no matter how discreetly, always secretly hope that the other might one day realise it. I am no different."

Shen Wei gazes deeply into Zhao Yunlan's eyes. "Sometimes I think, if one day you can remember everything, then I'll be able to say to

you: look, I did it, I did all that I promised you; not one bit did I miss, not one word did I go back on. What would be the look on your face then? No-one is entirely selfless, Ah Lan, and that goes for me too... but I really couldn't bear it. Destiny commands life, even the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors had to follow a set path, Pangu collapsed, Nüwa's soul dissipated. You were the almighty Mountain God, but nonetheless subject to the same fate of the Great Ones before you... you had no choice. Lord Kunlun bore the weight of all the mountains of the world; I couldn't bear to see you live in pain. Being a happy human seemed a much better choice. When they all turned against you on top of Mount Kunlun, I really... really wanted to kill them all."

Zhao Yunlan asks, lowering his voice, "So it was you who blocked Da Qing's earliest memories? And you who cut my connection with the Guardian Order? I... a happy human? And leave you to bear all my burdens? What gives you the right?"

Zhao Yunlan's voice fades more and more, until it's barely audible anymore. It's no more than a hoarse whisper, but with a lot of effort, he manages to form some words: "When you made that promise, were you thinking that since the life of a human is no more than seventy or eighty years long, gone in the blink of an eye, I'd soon forget about you? So you planned to stay with me for this final stretch, and then follow in the footsteps of Nüwa?"

Shen Wei says nothing in response.

Zhao Yunlan wrenches his collar down. Fingers trembling, teeth chattering uncontrollably, he forces out: "I'd never agree to it, not over my dead body! Not over my dismembered body! Not over my dissipated soul!"

Shen Wei is pulled down by Zhao Yunlan's weight as he hangs onto his neck like a madman. Zhao Yunlan pulls him into his arms and



kisses him frantically. He rips two buttons off his shirt, revealing Shen Wei's pale chest. "I'll never... agree to it!"

The never-before experienced passion is like an instant sweep of wildfire, paralleling countless euphoric dreams Shen Wei used to awaken from at night. This is like another magnificent dream turning his world upside down.

He doesn't know when this dream will end. Even if the sky collapses and the earth shatters, it must never see the light of day. It can't be confessed and should never have been born; but now it is born it cannot die, nor can it be forgotten, and thinking about it brings unbearable pain.

Finally, Shen Wei loses control and flips Zhao Yunlan around, pressing him into the soft pillow. The rising waters in his heart overflow and break the dam.

~~~

The next morning, Zhao Yunlan is awakened by the sun shining through the curtains. His mind is empty for a while, utterly vacant. For most of the night before, he was in a muddled daze. Now and then suffocating, and utterly intoxicated, he couldn't tell if he was having a ludicrous dream or if it was real...

He tries to force his eyes open, but his eyelids are heavy. He manages to sit up with difficulty, but his head starts spinning, the ceiling whirling and twirling, and he sinks back down.

If he looked into a mirror now, he'd see that he's not simply tired. His face has a grey tint and he's plainly beyond exhaustion, almost reminiscent of death. Then, a pair of hands carefully lift him up and place a bowl at his mouth. He can't tell what's in it, but it smells very strange. Zhao Yunlan instinctively turns his head away from the stench. "What..."

"Herbal medicine. I hurt you last night." Shen Wei's voice is incredibly gentle, but his hands are not. He turns Zhao Yunlan to face him and basically forces the medicine down his throat.

Zhao Yunlan suddenly regains some strength and pushes his hand away. He coughs for a while, feeling like the awful taste is about to make him puke. Then, Shen Wei holds a glass of water to his mouth, and he finally wakes up completely. He opens his eyes to look at Shen Wei and drinks the water quietly.

After emptying the glass, he sits up and leans against the headboard. Elbows propped up on his knees, he glances at Shen Wei gloomily. He lowers his head and thinks about something for a while, and then throws Shen Wei an even more depressed look. Finally, he chokes out, "I was fucking innocent, you... you... you couldn't have been gentler with my virgin ass?"

A sweep of red spreads over Shen Wei's face. He turns away and coughs awkwardly. "I am sorry."

"I..." Pain from his waist down makes Zhao Yunlan's face contort. He gasps, but looking at Shen Wei's expression, he almost feels like he was the one who took advantage.

Though he has dreamed countless times of dying in a beauty's bed, he never dreamed of it quite this way...

Bullshit. Who is he trying to convince?

Conflicting emotions flash across Zhao Yunlan's face for quite a while. Then, he looks down at the bowl that contains the unknown medicine. Reminded of the taste, he makes another face. "Get me another glass of warm water. Painkillers should work just fine for this."

Shen Wei takes away the bowl. "This is effective; I mean no harm."

Zhao Yunlan says blandly, "You mean no harm, you just like to torture me to death."

Shen Wei doesn't know what to say.

Always a gentleman, Professor Shen comes to stand next to him wearing a shamefaced expression. He looks like he has failed a saint, exactly like a young wife who has accidentally broken a bowl.

Zhao Yunlan is speechless.

Shen Wei carefully helps him lie down, "You should... sleep for a while longer. What do you want to eat?"

Zhao Yunlan says stubbornly, "You. Lie down and let me ravish you."

Shen Wei looks down rapidly as the tips of his ears redden. He pouts, embarrassed. "In broad daylight? What nonsense."

Dammit, Zhao Yunlan thinks.

Whatever Shen Wei gave to him seems to be helping him sleep. Once he lies down, Zhao Yunlan quickly grows drowsy, but he stubbornly clings to Shen Wei's hand. "I'll do whatever it takes. I'd give my life for you, so don't give me any more troubles, do you hear me... there's always a way... I'll find a way... I'll find..."

Shen Wei sits down beside him, and tenderly places his palm on his forehead. He feels Zhao Yunlan's breathing even out. Under the effects of that 'herbal medicine', his face starts to lose its deathly grey tint and quickly returns to its normal colour. Shen Wei is relieved. He gets up quietly and takes the bowl back to the kitchen to clean it.

Zhao Yunlan sleeps until evening, accompanied by scattered and fragmented dreams.

Primordial Past

Chapter 76

When Zhao Yunlan went into the Holy Tree, he took with him more than just the Ink Brush of Virtue.

The Holy Tree has always been linked to Mount Kunlun throughout the five thousand years since the creation of the universe. Heading in, Zhao Yunlan felt like he was entering a brand new dimension. He tried to reach back and steady himself on the tree bark he had just passed on his way in, but he couldn't feel it anymore. As he moved forward, he couldn't make out anything around him.

His surroundings were lightless. The air was perfectly still. Everything was pitch black.

He squinted and tried to look into the distance. Finally, he found a feeble flicker in the darkness, much like that of a firefly. As he moved in closer, he could see that it was the Ink Brush of Virtue, shrunk down to the size of a normal calligraphy brush made of weasel hair and pistachio wood.

Zhao Yunlan tentatively reached out to take it, and surprisingly, it didn't take much effort at all. He raised his eyebrows. Acquiring this treasure was too easy to be true! But then the Ink Brush exerted an unknown force, pulling him forward.

Rationally, Zhao Yunlan knew he should've taken the Ink Brush and headed back, but he couldn't stop himself from walking on.

Once he had naively closed his hand around the Ink Brush, it had already lured him in.

He didn't know how much time he spent in utter darkness. He had a few ways to create light, but none of them seemed to work, so he

had no choice but to sit on the ground and wait.

He was strong-willed and neither darkness nor isolation frightened him, so that place didn't trouble him much at first. Still, a boundless space of complete darkness isn't very pleasant. The dark, however, was a very strange kind of dark: not only was he indifferent to the possibility of being trapped, he even started to believe that he was always supposed to fall into a deep sleep there.

He sat in the darkness, yawning, and grew drowsier and drowsier.

At that moment, right next to him, there was a sudden cracking sound. Before he could react, the dark space shattered with a bang and a glaring flash of light. Zhao Yunlan jumped to his feet and scrambled back a few steps. Over a large area, light streamed inside, and he had to squint his eyes against the glare. All he saw was a giant axe splitting the darkness apart. A loud rumbling sound was emanating from deep underground, and the rift got ever larger and wider, splitting space in two.

A colossal man towered amidst the chaos, wielding an axe. His head reached the sky, his feet touched the earth, his hair flowed in the wind and his mouth roared with anger, sending countless shock waves across the vast desolate space.

It split apart, the sky striving upwards, and the earth downwards. Ten feet every day the sky rose and the earth thickened, and Pangu also grew ten feet every day. Thus, after eighteen thousand years, the sky reached its height and the earth its maximum expansion, and Pangu had grown to his final size.

Thus the belief that the sky and earth sit apart ninety thousand miles. The Three Sovereigns came thereafter.

*Such was Pangu the creator.*¹²¹

Zhao Yunlan opened his eyes to the sky above and earth below, and watched helplessly as Pangu collapsed with a loud rumbling sound, his humongous axe breaking in two: the handle turning into Mount Buzhou, and the head into Mount Kunlun. The giant fell as his limbs and head became the Five Great Mountains¹²², rising up steeply from the ground and towering into the skies.

Then rivers flowed, the sun and the moon shone, and valleys were formed.

An ocean of stars stretched out above, and an inexplicable touch of sorrow arose in Zhao Yunlan's heart. He inadvertently began moving forward to take a closer look at this giant man connected to his blood, but could only watch as he faded away silently.

Zhao Yunlan turned around abruptly and found himself in the same limitless space again. Thousands of years rushed by. He heard the sublime resonance of the wind from Buzhou, and he heard the restless tempestuous shudders from within the depths of the earth. Yet time flew swiftly without leaving a trace.

In the depths of the earth, the truest, cruellest, crudest, savagest, fiercest... were all connected by blood with the true Kunlun. As they were born from chaos, the unknown connection was too.

Mount Kunlun was born with the sky and earth, and after one hundred million and three thousand years, the soul of the mountain had materialised, and thus Lord Kunlun was born.

At that time, the Three Sovereigns¹²³ were young, and the Five Emperors had yet to be born. The world contained only birds and beasts, and humans were nowhere to be found.

Zhao Yunlan was soon bewildered: on one hand, he knew where he came from, and held the Ink Brush in a tight grasp; on the other

hand, he felt he had turned into a mischievous, troublemaking youngster.

He peed on the almighty Fuxi's tail, then he scared away the Phoenix nesting in the Holy Tree; from that time on, the bird only nested in sycamores. Finally, Nüwa found a newborn kitten somewhere and gave it to him to play with, and that got him to quieten down at last.

The kitten was very fragile. On the forever-snowbound Mount Kunlun, it constantly seemed on the verge of dying.

Lord Kunlun had never seen anything quite as troublesome. With his own hands, he melted down some gold dust into a small bell with soul-stabilising and wisdom-amplifying properties and hung it around the cat's neck. Keeping the cat alive was so time consuming that he no longer had any time to cause trouble for others.

He could only leave the mountain again when the kitten had grown up and began running around on its own. He took it downhill, where he saw Nüwa making humans out of clay.

In her hand was a magic branch, which she was waving around as she pleased. Where it touched the ground, numerous 'people' that looked much like gods emerged from the earth. Lord Kunlun had never witnessed such a lively scene before. He was instantly mesmerised and didn't want to step away again.

Nüwa turned around and smiled at him. "Kunlun, you've grown a lot."

Lord Kunlun put down the cat he was carrying and carefully approached. He stared intensely at a tiny clay man that Nüwa had just created.

He saw the man quickly grow from juvenile to adolescent, and the adolescent knelt and worshipped him with fear and reverence. Before he could rise again, he grew to adulthood, then his full head

of hair started receding and turning white. Finally he withered, dropped to the ground, and turned back into clay.

Lord Kunlun felt an inexplicable envy, though he couldn't tell why: perhaps time had been moving too slowly for him, so he coveted a life that burned bright and brief like a shooting star.

"How fun." Lord Kunlun held the clay in his palm. "What is this called?"

Nüwa replied, "It's a human."

Lord Kunlun said without much thought, "Humans are great, so innocent, yet they carry with them the things I've heard from beneath the earth even before I was born."

When Nüwa heard this, her expression changed to one of utmost panic.

Lord Kunlun was still young and knew only of fooling around with his furball of a cat under the Holy Tree. He couldn't read the look in Nüwa's eyes, couldn't understand that in a split second, she had already foreseen the great calamity that was to come.

Humans were born from the earth and ridden with the Three Corpses, linking them to the evil that came from within the depths of the Underworld. And yet they had already started living their happy lives like monkeys, differentiated into males and females according to Nüwa's rules, and started pairing off in marriage and producing offspring.

Why did she have to use the earth to make them? The Heavens had accorded Nüwa great merit for creating humans. But when she looked up to the sky with its myriad stars, she felt something... something cold and ever-present, like an invisible hand. It encompassed them and inexorably pushed them forward, men and gods alike, and none could resist.

Events had already been set in motion¹²⁴. There was nothing to be done unless she killed all the humans.

Nüwa grieved without pause for forty-nine days. The clay men had already run across mountains and traversed rivers and seas. Countless days and months—and soon several generations—had passed. Nüwa turned around abruptly when she heard a noise, and she realised that humans had already started forming tribes around their fires. Men and women wore the skin of beasts, and children were playing in crowds: all of them looked identical to the gods.

She suddenly covered her face and wept. Kunlun and the cat stood by helplessly; neither could understand her sorrow.

Looking back, it was probably natural for the first mother to feel for her children. Maternal instinct is hard to overcome.

Nüwa sought help from Fuxi and borrowed three thousand stars from the galaxy. The two worked together for thirty three days and made the Great Seal, which covered the earth like a giant net.

Lord Kunlun was sitting on the side holding his cat. He never knew so much flame was hidden beneath the earth. It roared ferociously from beneath: yet nobody wrote of it, and nobody knew of it. All who witnessed it were ignorant, completely oblivious to the fact that a battle had just taken place—a battle more intense than the battles of gods that were to come.

Finally, Fuxi made the Eight Trigrams¹²⁵ and with their help forced the Great Seal upon the depths of the Underworld.

Nüwa asked Lord Kunlun for a branch from the Holy Tree, which she planted at the entrance of the Great Seal, and named it the 'Profane Lands'. After that, Lord Kunlun never saw Fuxi again.

When the Great Seal was made, Lord Kunlun felt empty inside. The evils from the depths of the Underworld burned like wildfire, and could cause great disaster if not handled with care. Yet, they were free and passionate, and Kunlun suddenly felt wistful.

The young Kunlun couldn't put his feelings into words; a single string of tears fell from his eye and became the Yangtze River.

Fuxi had disappeared, and only Nüwa was left, wandering alone across the lands of the primordial times. She watched the sunrise and sunset, she watched humans endure the challenges of life, and she grew more and more anxious.

Then, Nüwa went into hiding, and Lord Kunlun returned to his mountain. Over the next hundred years, he passed by the Profane Lands several times, and looked upon the withered branch of the Holy Tree every time. As time passed, he matured, and gradually, he began to understand what was locked away by the Great Seal, and the reasoning of the gods before him became a bit clearer to him. Though he was curious to take a look inside, he never did.

Kunlun couldn't forget what the great Fuxi had sacrificed to make the Great Seal, that he had spilled his heart's blood to create the Eight Trigrams. He couldn't let all that effort go to waste.

Yet, the seeds of the Three Corpses were sown nonetheless. Men would grow to become emperors and saints. Shennong's downfall would be followed by the rise of the Yellow Emperor and his battle with the God of War, Chiyu. All creatures of the universe would inevitably be sucked into that vortex of calamity.

The Three Sovereigns disappeared, and the primordial lands never saw a day of tranquility again. Humans lived devoutly and sturdily, with warmth and with joy, and still with the same inevitable need for bloodshed and warfare, much like any other animal.

They were like gods, and they were like demons. Their dual nature endowed them with more capacity for emotions than any other creatures, and they developed countless eccentric ones: envy, hatred, stubbornness, restraint... and incomparable love and hate.

Yet the ones who had first lived in that land were no longer to be found anywhere.

Lord Kunlun finally understood why Nüwa was so afraid despite the great merit the Heavens accorded her for her creation.

When Pangu destroyed chaos, it was dispersed into the universe. There it remained and endured through constant change. Great virtue, great evil, great wisdom, great valour: all would come to this world with hubris, yet die without leaving a mark.

Smoke signals announced the outbreak of war as the clouds gathered in the Nine Heavens; the Kun Peng flew to the West, never to return¹²⁶. Kunlun turned a blind eye to the first great war between gods and demons, which coincidentally revealed his own destiny. He had stood apart from the world for millions of years, and his heart had remained pure and unaffected. But now he suddenly felt an uncontrollable surge of grief and unbearable loneliness.

Chiyou, predicting his own imminent defeat, came to the foot of Mount Kunlun. Lord Kunlun firmly closed the gate and refused to see him, so the formidable¹²⁷ God of War made his way up the perpetually snow-covered mountain, kowtowing¹²⁸ after every step. His clothes turned ragged and he left a bloody trail, and eventually he became like a galsang flower, which can grow even in frozen earth and survive in deep snow. Chiyou hoped that Lord Kunlun would remember that goblins and fairies were born from his mountain, and would protect them.

Kunlun still wouldn't see him, so Chiyou kowtowed repeatedly outside the gate on Mount Kunlun. But the Primordial Mountain God

wasn't moved.

Kunlun had spent a long time in that world of ice and snow, and his heart grew to be as cold and hard as the mountain peak. Yet the black cat was born of the fairies and was inadvertently attracted by their ancestor. The cat sneaked out and licked Chiyou's bloodied forehead.

By the time Lord Kunlun found out, fate had already taken its course. The God of the Mountain, much like Nüwa, was pushed towards a future that he wished to avoid; and he, too, couldn't escape this invisible force and the path on which it put him.

Chapter 77

Chiyou perished from his fatal wounds and turned into a blood-red maple forest. The Yellow Emperor was impressed by his bravery and posthumously named him the God of War.

From then on, the shamans and shifters of the world worshipped Lord Kunlun as their leader, and were protected by the mountains.

Unfortunately, after the great war, the humans on earth still didn't live together in harmony. More wars were started, tribes against tribes, and races against races, dividing them further, forming ever smaller groups.

Yet, Lord Kunlun never showed up. He was waiting.

He had witnessed Fuxi's downfall, Nüwa's solitude, Shennong losing his powers, and going missing. For all this time, he waited.

Without a word, he witnessed the Yellow Emperor lifting Chiyou's head up, thinking that it didn't matter who it was, as long as he brought peace to the world.

He waited for the Yellow Emperor to conquer the Land of Gods, and he waited for the end of all conflicts. But while the Yellow Emperor fought all his life, he had only made slight progress before he passed away.

The Flame and Yellow Emperors left descendants who fought for power along the Yellow River. The East was not in peace either, for the descendant of Chiyou, Houyi, had somehow acquired the great bow Fuxi left behind, crowned himself 'Emperor Jun', fought the barbarians and won, and united the Eastern tribes, along with the shamans of the primordial lands.

That year, all the crows fell from the sky and never made a sound again. The descendant of Shennong, Gonggong the God of Water¹²⁹, and the descendant of the Yellow Emperor, Zhuanxu¹³⁰, began another great war.

Gonggong had the power to control water, and he was descended from the Flame Emperor Shennong. He called an army of dragons from the oceans, and after that, countless other shifter tribes were drawn into the war as well. Before Houyi from the East had time to join the battle around the Yellow River, the shamans and the shifters, who were both protected by Kunlun, started going their separate ways.

In that war, many of the shifter tribes perished. The world was in great chaos; souls trapped among the living howled with great despair day and night across the charred battlefields.

After pleading so earnestly with Kunlun and dying, Chiyu received his opponent's utmost respect. His descendants, on the other hand, were relieved by his death and burnt the Temple of the God of War to the ground. Gradually, all the human, shifter, and shaman tribes started forgetting this ancestor and his legacy of savagery and bravery that still ran in their blood.

In common folklore, Chiyu slowly took on the image of a hideous and evil deity.

Lord Kunlun was greatly disappointed.

He finally understood why Nüwa had been so desperate and frightened. Even at the time she created humans, she must already have foreseen the storm clouds on the horizon. However, she had no way to turn back time, so she had no choice but to stand by impassively for tens of thousands of years, closing her eyes and ears to their plight.

Lord Kunlun was the master of all the mountains on Earth, and he had always liked mountain and river spirits. Chiyou had painstakingly tricked the black kitten into licking and swallowing his blood; Lord Kunlun had no choice but to suffer the consequences for this foolish action: he had to promise Chiyou that he would protect those shamans and shifters who lived in and around the mountains and rivers for all the years to come.

He had witnessed them grow, cultivate and find their places in the world.

Now he had to watch them get trampled like weeds, watch them die in droves in flaming infernos, watch them struggle to survive in the cracks while war raged all around them.

If this was destiny, if destiny meant endless warring and bloodshed, if destiny dictated boundless chaos troubling the world, inevitably leading to grief and despair...

Gonggong the Water God had lost the war; now he harnessed his godly dragon to retreat and regroup. The dragon tribe had always been Lord Kunlun's favourite, but as Gonggong reached the Northwestern end¹³¹, Lord Kunlun heartlessly stabbed the godly dragon in the eyes. Gonggong crashed into Mount Buzhou along with the dragon, puncturing a hole into Fuxi's Great Seal, which was located under the mountain.

The numerous ghosts in the Profane Lands wailed as one, their evil surging into the atmosphere. They streaked and swirled all around Mount Buzhou with nothing to fear, as if they were deities themselves. Lord Kunlun took a soul fire from his left shoulder and with its help awakened all of the Underworld from its deep slumber. He snapped the sky pillar in half, and the sky fell down to earth.

Where do Earth and Sky converge? How far does Heaven stretch?
What do the Eight Pillars carry? Why did the South East sink?¹³²

The God of the Mountain standing atop Mount Kunlun had finally grown to become a man, and went on a path that differed greatly from those the gods before him had taken. Nüwa finally reappeared after her many years of absence. She almost didn't recognise the child who had been so easily distracted by a kitten. His green cloak danced in the fierce mountain wind and his eyes were as sharp as Pangu's great axe all those years ago.

Lord Kunlun had already sent his faithful companion the cat down the mountain. He turned around, unfazed by the cacophony caused by the sky pillar collapsing, hands clasped behind his back, and saw Nüwa. He was not surprised, and simply opened his mouth to say, "What you could never bring yourself to do in the past, I've done in your stead.

"Pangu spent his life separating the sky from the earth and shattering the dark void. Finally, he bowed to his destiny and died, having exhausted all his power. The deities of the primordial lands grew up strong in that barren wilderness,¹³³ why should they bow to something intangible? Why should they all be pushed towards a predetermined tragic end?

"I want the sacrifices of the sons of Zhuanxu to not be in vain. I want sky and earth to no longer converge, so unknown forces above shall no longer interfere. I'll cut off the pathway to Heaven, so that life on Earth will be governed by yin and yang as in Fuxi's Eight Trigrams, self-contained and whole. I don't want anyone to manipulate my fate, and I don't want anyone to judge my deeds. I'll make an ink brush from the dying offshoot of the Holy Tree located in the Profane Lands, so all living souls can write their own destiny. I'll purge this world of its sufferings."

Nüwa stared at him, wordless.

"Whatever shall come, let it come my way... Pangu and Fuxi are gone, now it's only you and me. You wish to hide from this world, but I still have aspirations." Lord Kunlun laughed lightly, and his voice was quickly swallowed by the howling wind. "If you're powerful enough, let lightning cleave Mount Kunlun, let it strike me dead now. Only then will I give up."

No sooner had he finished speaking that lightning indeed struck Mount Kunlun, flinging a spray of snow and ice into the air. Nüwa's eyes watered in the glaring light; she couldn't see a thing.

But she could hear Lord Kunlun's feral laughter.

The heavenly thunder roared for an entire night, heavy rain pelted the lands incessantly, and demons ran riot. The next day, Lord Kunlun's clothes were unrecognisable; his entire body was scorched black, and he still sat on the ground in the same place, completely nude.

Eventually, he got to his feet, covered in new, freshly-grown skin and flesh, like a moulting cicada leaving behind its old shell.

He extended his arm, and a single leaf fell from the Holy Tree, wrapping around his body into a new green cloak. Lord Kunlun flicked his hair back, stood straight, and coughed up a mouthful of blood. Then, he turned around towards Nüwa with a bloodied smile. "Do you see? What can the Heavens do to me?"

That smile looked the same as always, with a carefree naivety.

Nüwa finally spoke. "Kunlun, come with me, help me collect the colored stones to repair the sky¹³⁴, don't be obstinate."

"But I want to try," Lord Kunlun said quietly. "No matter what, I want to try... even if I die trying, I'll die as Mount Kunlun, not just a small burial mound in the middle of nowhere."

Then, he went down the mountain without turning back.

Pangu had died of exhaustion, then that unseen force compelled Nüwa to create humans, foreshadowing countless more stories. Fuxi was silent, but shaped the future with his Eight Trigrams; he couldn't escape his fate and died creating them. Shennong saw his own downfall, and gradually became like any ordinary being. Only Nüwa was left.

Thus the Great Ones fell one after another. Finally, it was Lord Kunlun's turn.

In this world, are only the feeble and the foolish allowed to live brainless and brief lives?

Mayflies know nothing of months, winter cicadas know nothing of seasons. ¹³⁵

In myths and legends told centuries after, Mount Kunlun was portrayed as the land of the gods. Everyone had already forgotten that in fact, the primordial god of the mountain, Lord Kunlun, was the first to rebel.

Lord Kunlun came down from the mountain, and saw the countless Underworld beasts running rampant. These were the ghost tribe. They didn't come from living souls, but from the evil energy sealed in the Profane Lands for ages. They had long ago turned mad, and they indiscriminately preyed on humans and drank their blood.

Oddly enough, even such creatures knew a hierarchy.

The lowest of them had no discernible shape, sloshing around on the ground like muck, feeding on decaying corpses. Slightly higher were the demon beasts: they had a roughly humanoid shape and walked upright. But they were infested with pustules, had distorted faces and a savage temper.

The higher up in the hierarchy, the more they resembled humans. A Ghost King looked like an angel; as if the filthier the creature, the lovelier the appearance.

Legend says that in the depths of the Underworld, there were only two of these exceptional Ghost Kings, more precious than the Three Sovereigns on Earth. By coincidence, as Lord Kunlun went downhill, he arrived in Kuafu's legendary Peach Forest¹³⁶ and encountered one of them.

It was a youth with dark eyes and dark hair. He sat on a giant boulder, barefoot, his long hair spilling over his shoulders, wearing clothes made of rough garments. Seeing Lord Kunlun suddenly emerging from the woods gave him such a shock that he accidentally lost his footing on the boulder. He fell into a small stream and got drenched from head to toe.

At this instant, a demon beast emerged from beneath and viciously bit at the youth's neck, which looked tender and weak, as if it could be broken with one hand.

Suddenly, the youngster's hand emerged from under the water at a weird angle, spanning the beast's gaping jaw. Turning around, he pushed the beast into the water, crushing its skull with a single hand. Blood sprayed up and all across his face, like red plum blossoms on a white field of snow.

The youth looked helplessly at the blood splatter on his body. He carefully kneeled down and washed his hands and face in the stream. Then, he picked up the corpse with practised ease. He opened his mouth, revealing pointed canines, and started nibbling at the tender neck.

It was only then that Lord Kunlun was certain he was a Ghost King. He had never seen anyone more like one than the youth in front of him. The young beauty sat in the water running red with the demon

beast's blood, unhurriedly feeding on its corpse, his face expressionless; it was a scene more gruesome than anything ever seen above the Underworld.

As the youth realised that Lord Kunlun was watching him, his meal slowly ground to a halt. He raised his head to Kunlun, who wasn't standing that far away from him now, and shot him a furtive glance. Then he took another reluctant bite, careful not to let the blood spill out of his mouth. He swallowed and then daintily wiped his lips, as if he thought that wiping the blood off of his mouth would make him look neat and clean.

Although Lord Kunlun did sacrifice a soul fire for the Underworld, he only did it to break Mount Buzhou, disconnecting Heaven from Earth. He had forgotten Nüwa's regrets when the Profane Lands were first sealed away, and he never showed any interest in coming close to these bloodthirsty creatures.

At that moment, however, he found himself walking forward. He asked, "Hey kid, you're a Ghost King, right? Shouldn't you be able to control the ghost tribe? Why did that thing try to bite you?"

The youth trembled and the corpse fell from his hands into the water with a splash, spraying his face. He stared at the approaching Lord Kunlun with alarm, beady black eyes wide, mouth agape, body paralysed.

"Don't you know how to talk? That can't be." Lord Kunlun leaned against the boulder casually, raising his eyebrows. "Got a name? What do I call you?"

"... Wéi.¹³⁷"

"Which Wei?"

"...mountain ghost."

"Mountain Ghost?" Lord Kunlun leaned forward onto the boulder and raised his eyebrow again, "Fitting, but not very impressive. Look at the endless mountain ranges of the world. How about we add a few more strokes and change it to Wēi: lofty and towering?"¹³⁸

Chapter 78

Lord Kunlun asked, "Little Ghost King, why aren't you with your ghost tribe?"

The youth lowered his head in silence for a moment, and then said softly, "They're dirty."

Lord Kunlun was stunned, and asked with great interest, "Dirty how?"

The young man didn't dare look at him, but instead stared at Lord Kunlun's reflection in the water. Then he said earnestly, "They know nothing but killing and eating. I don't want to be near them."

Lord Kunlun pointed out just as solemnly, "That's what the ghost tribe is like."

The young Ghost King scowled, but when he looked back up towards Lord Kunlun, he smoothed his features, as if in the habit of restraining his savage nature. After a pause, in a lowered voice, he asked softly, "Must I be the same as them, just because I was born of the ghost tribe?"

Lord Kunlun didn't reply. The youth stood up in the water, apparently having lost his appetite. He dragged out the corpse of the demon beast and tossed it aside. Then, he washed his face in the now-clean water, bent down silently, and wrung his coarse-spun clothes out. He rolled up his trousers, climbed out of the water, and looked at Lord Kunlun. His eyes were like raven feathers on a field of snow. Then he said, indifferently, "I don't like it. I'd rather not live."

After that, he pointedly didn't go near the boulder he'd sat on before, which was now occupied by Lord Kunlun. Instead, he carelessly sat

on the river bank, his bare feet dripping water onto the ground. He gazed upon the peach woods, the mountain ranges behind the woods, the clouds shrouding the snowy mountain tops, the perpetual torrents of rain, and the skies rolling with thunder and flashing with lightning.

Lord Kunlun couldn't help but ask, "What are you looking at?"

The youth pointed towards where he was looking. "It's nice to look at."

"What's so nice about a rainy day?" Lord Kunlun said, leaning against the boulder and sitting down beside the youngster. "When it's sunny, Mount Kunlun is truly magnificent, golden beams of sunlight gleaming on the snow like blooming flowers. And when the snow recedes from the craggy rocks and summer has come, a thin layer of grass grows there, all green. And so many flowers too... those small blossoms, we call them galsang flowers."

The youth was mesmerised for a moment, staring at Lord Kunlun intently.

Lord Kunlun suddenly said, "Well, you won't see them any more."

"Why?"

"I pierced the sky to set your people free." Lord Kunlun couldn't help but reach out and touch the young Ghost King's head. His hair was as soft as it looked; his neck was tense but he held still. It was hard to believe how tamely he let him caress his head. Just a moment ago he'd been gnawing on a demon beast's throat, and at a closer look it was still noticeable that he hadn't completely wiped his mouth clean.

He reminded Lord Kunlun of his pet kitten.

"Why pierce the sky?" the young Ghost King asked.

"It was a promise." Lord Kunlun patted his head lightly. "You wouldn't understand, kid."

The youth looked up with utmost seriousness. "I do understand. I never knew what was outside. If I'd known sooner how beautiful the world beyond the Great Seal was, I would've pierced a hole in it too."

Lord Kunlun shook his head, and laughed. The youth looked at him with unblinking eyes. After some time, Lord Kunlun said gently, "Preferring not to live if you can't make your own choices. Looks like I've met my soulmate."

Lord Kunlun stood up and turned to go as Nüwa's figure flickered in mid-air, rushing about busily, apparently still desperately searching for colourful stones to repair the sky. Lord Kunlun let out a low chuckle; the mountains and rivers, spirits of life, had plunged into darkness and chaos, and he felt a strange surge of joy.

After a moment of hesitation, the young Ghost King stood up and followed him.

Lord Kunlun didn't mind and let him tag along. Suddenly he held up one hand, and a large mountain sprung up from the flat ground: Mount Penglai.

Many from the shaman and shifter tribes flocked to Mount Penglai to hide from the storm. The incessant rainfall had caused a huge flood in the Northwest that churned across the lands, sweeping towards the East.

Leaving behind barren earth across thousands of miles, the flood took countless lives. Emperor Zhuangxi knelt and bowed¹³⁹ and beseeched the Heavens.

But the Heavens were merciless.

The young Ghost King followed Kunlun on their way to the peak of Mount Penglai. The endless mountain ranges of the Earth rumbled amidst the chaos, which sent waves all the way to Mount Penglai. The shaman and shifter tribes were shaken. The shifters brought Chiyou's descendants, and Houyi¹⁴⁰ led his people in the footsteps of his ancestor, ascending Mount Penglai with one kowtow at every step. Infants would cry amidst the crowd, and the frightened adults were so afraid they might disturb the gods that they covered their mouths until they suffocated.

When they were halfway up, the monstrous flood caught up to them, its waist-high waters sweeping away half the people in the East. The cold and silent god on the mountain summit closed his eyes, like Nüwa, and sat unmoving like a statue.

Then, from the West came another group of people, dressed in rags, carrying bundles and dragging their feet, led by an old man with a medicine basket. They walked towards Mount Penglai, and Emperor Zhuanxu followed the old man reverently. Lord Kunlun finally opened his eyes, and whispered, "Shennong."

Shennong seemed to feel it and suddenly looked up from amongst the crowd. Heavenly thunder and lightning seemed to flash within his cloudy eyes.

Kunlun had said he would destroy Zhuanxu's people, and destroy all of humanity, but he never did. He simply wouldn't yield to fate, but he couldn't be bothered to kill these living beings with his own hands. He watched as Shennong and his people struggled up Mount Penglai. Zhuanxu knelt and worshipped Lord Kunlun, thanking him for creating Mount Penglai as a refuge. Shennong didn't say a word.

When the humans stepped aside, Kunlun stood up. Before he could greet Shennong, the withered old man slapped him across the face.

The young Ghost King showed his ferocious claws and growled. He was about to pounce on Shennong, but Lord Kunlun stopped him.

Lord Kunlun looked at the ugly old god, and said softly, "You're no longer a god. You're on the verge of death."

Shennong looked at him with dim, yellowed eyes. "It's time for me to die, as I've achieved what I set out to do. You were born of the mountains of the Earth; naturally, you were connected with the chaos and menace of the Underworld. And you carry within you the spirit of Pangu's axe. I always said that you were born of violence, and that you'd one day become the bringer of destruction; the never-ending snow atop Mount Kunlun was one such omen. And now here we are."

Kunlun stood in silence.

"You fail to consider the long term. You fail to tell right from wrong, good from evil, life from death. How dare you defy the Heavens?" Shennong slowly uttered, one word after another. "Such boldness is bound to be doomed. You... alas!"

Shennong's words were prophetic.

On the third day, the stars shattered into chaos, and demons terrorised the lands.

On the fourth day, the flood rose, and the people fled towards the peak. Shamans and shifters, whose differences had long ago been settled, began warring again.

On the seventh day, the war continued, and half of each tribe had perished. Descendants of the Flame and Yellow Emperors allied with the descendants of Chiyou, and they struggled to survive.

On the tenth day, Shennong preached words of wisdom amidst disasters and eulogies, beginning with the dawn of the universe.

On the twelfth day, Nüwa finally repaired the rain-filled sky and created new sky pillars out of the four limbs of the great turtle Ao¹⁴¹, exhausting herself completely.

On the thirteenth day, natural order broke down. The ghost tribe plagued the lands. The four new pillars trembled. The sky slanted downwards in the Northwest; mountains crumbled and the Earth split open; the skies wavered, on the edge of caving in.

The presumptuous deities had brought destruction upon themselves after defying Heavenly fate time and time again.

Heaven and Earth were merging, and the ghost tribe was on its way to devouring the entire world until chaos returned.

Lord Kunlun sat atop Mount Penglai like a statue, motionless and silent.

"Nüwa sent word that she has sealed the four pillars to secure them. She plans on sacrificing herself to stabilise Fuxi's Great Seal," Shennong said. "You did no wrong, Kunlun. Pangu did no wrong. None of us did any wrong. But there are countless sufferings in the world, all of which are destined. Whether silent as Fuxi, rebellious as you, death is inevitable. I'll soon perish like an ordinary human, and this is also fate. No-one can resist that. The problem is you know too much."

Kunlun opened his eyes calmly, and asked, "Chiyu asked me to protect the shamans and the shifters, and now fate has me decide which to save, or else they shall both perish, is that it?"

Shennong stared at him in silence.

"Save the shifters," Kunlun finally said.

Shennong let out a long sigh, knowing that he had compromised.

The great flood finally subsided. Nüwa greatly injured the evil Ghost King who wielded a great axe like Pangu. She then turned into Houtu¹⁴², and repaired the crack in the Great Seal, forcing the ghost tribe back under the four pillars. But Nüwa had used up too much of her energy repairing the sky, and she had suffered injuries from the Ghost King's axe. The Great Seal was repaired, but unstable still.

Shennong sat at Kunlun's temple, not uttering a word.

"I thought I'd die from a thunderbolt to the head," Lord Kunlun suddenly said. "Who'd have thought that my death had been determined when I stabbed the dragon in the eye and destroyed Mount Buzhou."

Shennong lifted his weary eyes, and silently looked at the last of the Great Ones of the primordial lands... perhaps Lord Kunlun could have gone into hiding, he could have forced the doors of Mount Kunlun shut with his primal magic. Even if the universe returned to chaos, he could have survived.

Yet, Lord Kunlun was born of Pangu's great axe, and he was the only one who would never go against what Pangu had hoped for the world.

Lord Kunlun was Pangu's legacy.

"I want to... see my cat one more time."

Shennong, his medicine basket on his back, walked deep into the mountains. Nüwa was nowhere to be seen.

All seemed lost. Lord Kunlun returned to his empty temple, and found only a dark-haired, dark-eyed, slender and feeble-looking youth.

The young Ghost King asked softly, "Are you sending me back under the Great Seal?"

"No. There's nothing I can do, but... I can at least protect you." Lord Kunlun grinned, his body trembling hard and his voice quivering slightly. "You don't want to belong to the ghost tribe, so I'll grant you that wish."

The young Ghost King was shocked. He turned Lord Kunlun around by the shoulder, only to find the mountain god with an almost translucent body, and a face as white as snow. Lord Kunlun raised his hands, the wide sleeves of his robes whipping up a breeze, and a ball of fire shone bright like a star in his palm. "Take it."

The young man received it with both hands.

"This is the soul fire from my left shoulder." Lord Kunlun had broken into a cold sweat, but he kept a gentle smile. "And I... I'll give you one more thing."

His body trembled violently as he pulled out a silver tendon from his body. There's no pain greater than that of peeling off one's skin and pulling out one's tendon. The young Ghost King teared up, but Lord Kunlun didn't seem to notice. "With this, you'll be able to... leave the Profane Lands behind you, and even become a god..."

"You... you have to protect the four pillars for me." Kunlun smiled. "With Nüwa's Sundial of Reincarnation, Fuxi's Awl of Mountains and Rivers, and... the Ink Brush of Virtue from the Tree of Virtue... and I'll give you one more thing..."

"Lord Kunlun!"

Lord Kunlun put a thumb under the young man's chin to make him lift his head, and said softly, "Rock, not yet old but ravaged; water, not yet cold but frozen; body, not yet lived but dead... Since Shennong

was willing to give up godhood and become a human, I'll give him one last thing to complete his dying wish..."

He coughed up a mouthful of blood in his palm, which transformed into a dark crimson candle wick. The mountain god standing before the Ghost King was becoming more and more transparent, more and more feeble. As he dispersed, a snow-white oil lamp remained, with just one word engraved at a corner: 'Guardian'.

Soul, not yet burnt but transformed. The Lantern of the Guardian.

With this, the four sky pillars would stand tall again, the Four Mystical Artefacts were complete, and the fourth Great One faded away. The Three Sovereigns had disappeared without a trace, and the young Ghost King was somehow turned into a god and tasked with the tremendous responsibility of protecting the pillars that held up the sky... it was Lord Kunlun's final taunt of Heavenly fate.

Thus began his responsibility, 5000 long years of it.

Zhao Yunlan feels like something has exploded in his brain. He seems to have experienced the pain of being skinned, of being crushed by all the mountains of the Earth, and of being bound by the Heavens all over again.

Countless years flash past¹⁴³ before his eyes, as a timeless sigh comes from within the Holy Tree... a voice whispering, "Why did you have to..."

"Pan... gu..."

Zhao Yunlan opens his eyes to glaring white light, feeling off-balance.¹⁴⁴ As he opens his eyes yet again, he's back in Dragon City with its festive New Year atmosphere. All lights are off at No. 4 Bright Avenue; lush green pines are shielding the courtyard like a canopy.

He feels a bit cold on his face. He reaches up to touch it, and finds his cheeks wet with tears.

Translator's Note by rainbowse7en:

That was a lot to take in. I know some of you might be confused by all the references to Chinese mythos. Bear in mind that the author took a lot of liberties in creating her own story, only loosely basing some parts on the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*¹⁴⁵.

I hope the following summary of key events helps. We'll start from the beginning of the universe.

1. Pangu died separating Heaven and Earth, thus paving way for life; the head of his axe became Mount Kunlun, and Lord Kunlun was the manifestation of the soul of the mountain.
2. Kunlun was a naughty teenager, so Nüwa gave him Da Qing to distract him.
3. Nüwa created humans.
4. Realising humans were born of the evil of the Underworld, Nüwa sought help from Fuxi to create the Great Seal to seal away the evil; Fuxi died to make the seal.
5. Nüwa went into hiding, Kunlun grew up, and humans began to war.
6. Kunlun witnessed the war for countless years, and finally put an end to it by breaking the Great Seal, awakening the Underworld with his left shoulder flame, and destroying the pathway to Heaven.

7. Kunlun wanted a world free from Heavenly fate, he wanted to create the Ink Brush and let every living being write their own destiny. But his plan ultimately caused greater chaos.

8. Kunlun met the young Ghost King for the first time.

9. Nüwa repaired the sky and restored the sky pillars, then sacrificed herself to restore the Great Seal; Shennong died too.

10. Kunlun gave the young Ghost King his left soul flame and his tendon so that the Ghost King could become a god, and the four Mystical Artefacts so that he could protect the four sky pillars; Kunlun then died.

Lantern of the Guardian

Chapter 79

When Guo Changcheng gets home, his first priority is sleep. Once he's had his sleep and starts looking more like a human being again, he tidies up his place and heads out to visit various relatives, not forgetting to pick up a few gifts on the way. Once he arrives at his second uncle's place, he wants to hand his uncle the red envelope immediately, as per his Chief's instruction. Guo Changcheng has this problem: if he has 'someone else's stuff' on his person it gives him the heebie-jeebies. Even though he knows that his uncle will probably just hand the red envelope back to him anyway.

Once he has greeted everyone at his uncle's place, the first thing he does is take out the red envelope. Like giving a police report, he recites everything verbatim in a solemn voice: "Uncle, our Chief said, to celebrate the New Year, this is for aunt and sister to buy some new clothes."

Changcheng's sister is another black sheep of the family: spends money like water and brings back none. This is his uncle's very first time receiving a red envelope from either of them. Greatly surprised, he takes the packet with some hesitation. He peeks inside in disbelief, then returns it to Guo Changcheng. "Wow, that's quite a lot; you can use it to buy something for yourself. That's strange, isn't that Lao Yang a total scrooge? Why did he think of giving out red envelopes all of a sudden?"

Guo Changcheng is confused. "Who's Lao Yang?"

His uncle stands up to take a tray of dumplings and says without thinking, "Isn't the head of the Residence Registry Lao Yang? What's his first name... Yang something... what was it again?"

Guo Changcheng says, "Our Chief's name is Zhao."

His uncle doesn't seem to take him seriously. As he places pairs of chopsticks on the table, he says, "Whatever his name is, I remember hearing that this guy is as thrifty as one can get, always taking home leftovers when he goes out to eat. But then again, he has both parents and children to look after. Everyone's got a family to feed, so it's understandable. You need to work hard, especially if your boss likes you; you're not a kid anymore, don't spend all your money, save some for emergencies and what not. You've got to learn how to take care of yourself..."

Guo Changcheng is more and more bewildered, and finally has to interrupt him. "Uncle, our Chief isn't even married."

"How is that possible? Isn't his daughter going to university soon? Just last month, I was telling everyone to be more considerate, since things aren't easy for him." Changcheng's uncle finally feels like there's something amiss. "Hold on, who gave you that red envelope?"

Guo Changcheng replies, "Our Chief Zhao."

"Chief Zhao? Which Chief Zhao?"

"Chief Zhao.... of the Special Investigations Unit?"

"SIU? Bright Avenue? Chief Zhao? Zhao Yunlan?" His uncle fires off a flurry of questions. He and Guo Changcheng are staring at each other intently. He puts a dumpling in his mouth and starts chewing distractedly. Still, he finds this all too incredible, and says with a mouthful, "That makes no sense, since when do I have the influence to recommend someone to the SIU?"

"What influence?" His aunt sits down at the table as well. "Aren't you at the Residence Registry?"

Guo Changcheng replies candidly, "I'm working for the Special Investigations Unit now."

"The *what* now? Crime investigations?" His aunt has seen this hapless kid grow up; she knows him all too well, and immediately begins to worry. "You think your uncle recommended you for something like that? How can our boy work for crime investigations? It's dangerous and unstable; what if you come across a murderer... oh no! Say, what kind of cases does your team work on?"

Guo Changcheng has just opened his mouth to answer when his uncle slams his chopsticks down on his bowl and says, "Don't ask silly questions! SIU cases are all classified; don't make him break the rules. What your aunt is really asking: is your work dangerous? Do you get tired all the time? How about I put a word in for you, maybe you could switch to a safer position, even if it pays a little less?"

At this point, the slow-witted Guo Changcheng finally realises... from the very beginning, his being assigned to the SIU was a mistake. Considering his less than stellar IQ and EQ, everybody in his family would know better than to recommend him for this prestigious position.

Of course, Guo Changcheng has long forgotten what happened when he reported for work on his first day: that meeting his ghostly co-worker made him pass out from fear.

Guo Changcheng has always found it hard to socialise. He has barely gotten used to the atmosphere at No. 4 Bright Avenue, but he has already become very fond of that place, especially of Chu Shuzhi and the others who took him under their wing.

As for Zhao Yunlan, Guo Changcheng basically treats him like half a dad... although this 'half-dad' suddenly found him a male stepmother unannounced.

And yet, this 'stepmother' is so kind and easy to talk to, so Guo Changcheng very adamantly says to his uncle, "I don't want to leave."

Guo Changcheng has always been one to go with the tide, whenever there's a decision to be made, he'll disappear, never having an opinion of his own. His uncle and aunt are both taken aback by his new-found decisiveness, they simply stare at him for some time.

After a good while, his aunt asks, "Is that place... really that good?"

Guo Changcheng nods enthusiastically.

"You really want to work there?" His uncle is still worried. "Is it really not dangerous?"

In order to stay, Guo Changcheng lies decisively. "Not dangerous at all."

"Well, all right then." His uncle comes to the conclusion that Guo Changcheng has finally grown up, though he has never had any achievement or ambition before. But now that he has passion for his work, it wouldn't be wise to extinguish that passion. He hesitantly agrees: "Then give me your Chief's number, I'll find the time to invite Zhao Yunlan for dinner. He's not much older than you, you need to learn from him."

~~~

The ringing of his mobile phone wakes Zhao Yunlan up. He feels like someone has drilled through his temples, they hurt so much. It seems he didn't get much rest and is now even more tired, despite just having woken up.

He doesn't know how long he slept. His dreams have been incoherent, always revolving around stabbing the godly dragon blind,

and then crashing into Mount Buzhou, the same thing over and over, never going anywhere.

Zhao Yunlan blindly gropes across his nightstand and soon holds his phone in his hand. He answers it without opening his eyes. Once he realises who's calling, his brain enters the appropriate mode automatically. After some lengthy pleasantries, Zhao Yunlan does his best to pick out some of Guo Changcheng's strengths, taking care not to exaggerate, so as to stealthily butter up his uncle. In this absolutely harmonious and mutually flattering atmosphere, the two agree to meet up.

Zhao Yunlan hangs up and buries his head in the pillow, whispering, "My head hurts."

Shen Wei immediately stops what he was doing and comes over. He takes him in his arms, and puts his hand on his forehead. "It feels a bit hot, why do you have a fever all of a sudden?"

Zhao Yunlan leans his feeble head on Shen Wei's shoulder and says with gritted teeth, "Why do you think? Get me something against the pain and the fever, you quack doctor."

Shen Wei does it silently, feeling tremendously guilty.

Zhao Yunlan swallows a few small pills in one gulp, then rolls up the sleeves on the pyjamas that Shen Wei somehow put him in. Suddenly he pounces, pushing Shen Wei down onto the bed. An absolutely fierce expression emerging on his face, he asks, "Master, were my services last night to your satisfaction?"

Shen Wei sees that he's still very unstable and hastily steadies him by the waist, buttoning up his pyjamas properly. "Don't lift up the blanket, all the warmth will escape and you will catch a cold."

"That's none of your business." Zhao Yunlan pushes down Shen Wei's shoulder with one hand, the other gripping his collar, and says

with a menacing voice, "Master, since you were satisfied, maybe you owe me a tip?"

Shen Wei lets himself be held down, and only looks up at him. To Zhao Yunlan, that's a blatant invitation to ravish him. His courage somehow skyrockets in his anger, and he begins ripping Shen Wei's clothes off. "If I can't do you today, I'll take your last name tomorrow... ow, fuck!"

Shen Wei quickly wraps an arm around him, "What's wrong?"

"Ow... ow ow ow, leg cramp."

Shen Wei is speechless.

Zhao Yunlan has probably always had a calcium deficiency, and on top of that he was utterly ravaged last night. The cramps get worse, first his thighs, then his calves, then the feet. Shen Wei can only apply firm pressure to stretch his legs amidst all the screaming and swearing, and gradually relieve his cramps.

Zhao Yunlan is in so much pain he's chewing on the corner of his blanket, until finally, the pain subsides. Shen Wei catches a glimpse of the bruises on Zhao Yunlan's body, there are patches of purple where his pyjamas expose a bit of skin. Contrite, he sits beside Zhao Yunlan and gently massages his sore muscles. Zhao Yunlan relaxes and lies down to enjoy the massage. When his gaze falls on his phone on the nightstand, he suddenly says, "Guo Changcheng's second uncle only just got a senior position this year, and I don't know him too well. Some say that he isn't good at anything, but he knows how to please everyone."

Shen Wei hums in agreement.

"He referred his nephew to me, who's been working for me for over half a year now. But he has never contacted me all this time—until



he called just now to invite me to dinner. Don't you think that's strange?"

Shen Wei doesn't understand the complicated unspoken rules of the workplace, and asks, "How so?"

"I suspect that the old man only just found out that Guo Changcheng is working for me, and that..." Zhao Yunlan stops for a moment, and doesn't continue. He inclines his head to peek at Shen Wei, and quickly changes the topic. "Did I really destroy the pathway to Heaven, Mount Buzhou?"

Shen Wei freezes for a second, and then says, "Legends say that Gonggong the River God bumped into Mount Buzhou, destroying it."

"Uh." Zhao Yunlan's eyelids droop... if the ghost tribe was only released after Mount Buzhou collapsed, then Shen Wei probably wouldn't know who exactly destroyed it.

Shen Wei hesitates, but he can't help asking, "So when you were in the Holy Tree, what..."

"The Holy Tree showed me things that happened five thousand years ago." Zhao Yunlan lifts his head from the pillow and turns towards him. "I saw you meeting me for the first time, when you fell from a big boulder into a pool of water. And so I thought, that must have been because I was too handsome, so handsome that you were blinded by my brilliance and fell into the water... ah!"

Shen Wei's grip inadvertently tightens on Zhao Yunlan's waist.

"Ow... my poor waist! Are you trying to murder your husband?"

Shen Wei resumes gently massaging him in silence. But perhaps since they've already taken the most intimate step, he very surprisingly admits, "Indeed... when I saw you for the first time, I almost fainted from shock. I will never forget that moment."

Zhao Yunlan's smile is smug and lascivious. "Hehehe, hey, Professor Shen, take off your useless glasses, and show your husband your old long-haired look."

Shen Wei very obediently takes off his glasses and returns to his original look. His jet black hair lengthens and spills across the bed.

Perhaps these silly men just somehow have a thing for long hair. Zhao Yunlan feels like Shen Wei's cuteness is piercing a soft spot in his heart. Smitten, he stares at Shen Wei for a long time; then he stretches out a grabby paw and starts softly caressing Shen Wei's hair. His heart in his hands, he murmurs, "Super, super super super beautiful. This life's definitely worth living."

Shen Wei's fingers keep kneading until his shoulders loosen, and the idiotic expression slowly fades from Zhao Yunlan's face. He ponders in silence for a bit, then cocks an eyebrow, and continues, "But I think, since I grew up with that fat fuck Da Qing, even if he treated me wrong, or eloped with a cat mistress, I wouldn't mind; I wouldn't do anything about it."

Shen Wei blinks in confusion, not quite sure why the topic has now turned to eloping cats.

"If I really promised Chiyou to take care of his descendents, and I watched generations of dragons grow up from small worms to million-mile-long beasts, I'd never have stabbed the godly dragon in its eye and crashed it into Mount Buzhou. I'd have rather stabbed myself in the hand," Zhao Yunlan announces resolutely. "I definitely didn't stab the dragon in the eye, and collapsing Mount Buzhou was absolutely not my doing either."

"The judge shamelessly spewed a bunch of bullshit, and none of it was true. I tricked them on the mountain, but I had to make one wild guess after another. How much of what I saw in the Holy Tree is true, do you think? And who showed it to me?" Zhao Yunlan twirls Shen

Wei's hair around his finger, with a smile on his face, but coldness in his eyes. After a while, he says softly, "Hey, baby, tell me more about what happened after we met at the peach woods."

Shen Wei lets out a quiet chuckle. "There is not much. I did not know anything at that time, and you treated me very well. You took me to see the mountains and streams of the Earth. But Nüwa had yet to repair the sky, and you would always say that even the most beautiful landscapes lose their charm when it's raining perpetually. But I did not mind; it was the most beautiful landscape I had ever seen."

"Even the most beautiful landscapes lose their charm when it's raining perpetually," Zhao Yunlan grumbles absently. Perhaps that was only a casual complaint. Zhao Yunlan frowns, and ponders that if he had indeed secretly planned to send the world into chaos, he would've had his mind on other things than taking a beautiful young stranger on a scenic tour of the country.

"Then afterwards, I made you a god," Zhao Yunlan says.

Shen Wei smiles. "Don't feel sorry for it. I was born an abomination, and in order to save me, you let me out of the Profane Lands. You did not do me any wrong. I will always be grateful."

As he's saying this, he leans forward and gently places a kiss on Zhao Yunlan's temple. He grabs hold of Zhao Yunlan's hand, and whispers, "No matter how little time I can spend with you, every single day is worth it."

"Bah, that's bullshit," Zhao Yunlan interrupts him. "After Nüwa repaired the sky, I sealed the sky pillars with the Mystical Artefacts, and then I left you behind... I died, didn't I?"

Shen Wei's hands freeze in place, and he embraces Zhao Yunlan tightly.

"Why..." Zhao Yunlan murmurs to himself. "Was it because of Nüwa?"

A touch of sadness emerges on Shen Wei's face, and Zhao Yunlan happens to catch a glimpse of it. This idiot immediately forgets all about what he was thinking, and lifts up Shen Wei's chin with his finger. "Don't be upset. I was just asking casually. You're way prettier than Nüwa of course. Come on, beautiful, tell your husband, how did you use your young, pretty face to seduce me all those years ago?"

Shen Wei covers him with the blanket and shoots him an uncomfortable glance, about to get serious and chastise him for his big mouth<sup>146</sup>. But then, he sees the love bite that still mars Zhao Yunlan's collarbone, and it reminds him of the inconceivable thing he did. He averts his gaze, and his ears turn red. Finally, all he manages is to mumble indistinctly, "I'm going for a walk."

He shoots to his feet, snatches the laundry receipt from the table, and heads out to pick up the laundry.

Zhao Yunlan rubs his lower back, which is still very sore. Many different indescribable emotions are welling up inside him.

After a while, he gets up to wash his face. He takes a bowl of food Shen Wei prepared for him out of the microwave, and eats with one hand, while making a phone call with the other. "Hey dad, you free tomorrow? I'm bringing Shen Wei to meet you."

As he says this, there's no joy on his face, his expression is as cold as ice.

## Chapter 80

As expected, Zhao Yunlan's father isn't home. Zhao Yunlan's mother is all apologetic, and keeps explaining that "he was really called away at the last-minute by a super important phone call".

Of course Shen Wei is the kind of person who doesn't mind. Zhao Yunlan wears a smile and stays uncharacteristically quiet. The two only stay for a quick meal before they leave again.

Zhao Yunlan is still not quite in his right mind after what happened in the Holy Tree, so he somehow doesn't notice... but what father would coldly excuse himself with a formal "we aren't done with the preparations, let us reschedule for a later time," when he knows full well his son's male lover is right there in the apartment?

It's not a blind date, what's there to prepare for? Does he need to go home and tidy his room, or retake the civil service exam?

He simply doesn't want to meet Shen Wei.

But why not? Does he not want to, or does he not dare to?

Just before leaving, Zhao Yunlan goes and retrieves a small and weathered wooden box from his bedroom. Puzzled, Zhao Yunlan's mother asks, "Didn't you play with that when you were young? How come you never threw it away, and what are you doing with it now?"

"Sharing childhood memories with my lover. Lonely old married couples like you who've grown tired of each other wouldn't understand."

And for that, his mother beats him out of the house.

It's Valentine's Day. Before, the streets were deserted because of the Spring Festival holidays, but now they're suddenly crowded with people. A girl who sells flowers passes by the two of them without giving them a second glance, but Zhao Yunlan waves and calls her back. "Hey, young lady, come back! How many flowers do you have?"

The flower girl looks at them in surprise, a smile appearing on her face. "As many as you want; I'm helping to sell them for the flower shop. If there aren't enough, I can go back to get more for you."

Zhao Yunlan says, "Then I'll have five thousand—"

"Sorry, sorry, he's just kidding." Shen Wei covers Zhao Yunlan's mouth and tows him away.

Zhao Yunlan struggles to free himself from Shen Wei's headlock. "I still wanna buy stuff, wait!!!!!!!"

Shen Wei pulls the car door open and stuffs him inside without a word.

Zhao Yunlan complains half-heartedly, "Don't you understand romance?"

Shen Wei fires back, his stomach twinging, "As if you do?"

Zhao Yunlan contrarily says, "I'll buy you thousands of flowers! I'll cover the entire car with them, and then I'll marry you!"

He's probably been bullying Shen Wei for too long; Shen Wei no longer is silently angry, but has become silently corrupted. He takes off his glasses, and with tight little movements wipes the frost off of them. Projecting indifference, he struggles to find a comeback. He says, taking care to appear calm, "And here I thought you wanted to become a flower merchant. I'd have married you anyway. Yesterday you said you'd take my last name."

Zhao Yunlan has gotten used to being the only one doing any bullying; other than that trip-up<sup>147</sup> the one time he got drunk, Shen Wei has never managed a rejoinder to his teasing. He's gobsmacked.

Of course, what he doesn't know is that - much like Guo Changcheng - Shen Wei had to rehearse this line three times in his mind to finally be able to say it smoothly out loud.

But Zhao Yunlan, the old scoundrel, recovers quickly, and shamelessly starts taking his clothes off. "All right, I'll take your last name, wanna bone right here in the car, hubby? You don't need to do anything, just sit back and relax, I'll satisfy you."

"Zhao Yunlan!" Shen Wei says angrily.

"Present."

"How... how can you be so shameless?"

Zhao Yunlan cages him in, his hands on the driver's seat on either side of Shen Wei, and says with a naughty smile, "You haven't seen me shameless."

Shen Wei's embarrassment finally turns into anger, and his face darkens. He grabs Zhao Yunlan by the collar, pulls him close to glare at him menacingly, and scolds him, enunciating every word clearly, "Do you realise we're in the street? Do you realise that passers-by will see us? Do you realise how many times I've thought about the people who have been with you and who have seen you, and wanted to dig their eyes out?"

Zhao Yunlan's eyes widen.

After a long moment, Zhao Yunlan finally shrinks back into his seat and mumbles, "Hey, actually I was just kidding, just kidding. I wasn't

gonna do anything. Still got serious stuff to do here."

Shen Wei starts the engine in silence. Zhao Yunlan rubs his nose and behaves, staying on his side of the car. He opens the little wooden box he brought from his parents' place and starts rummaging through the various knick-knacks he collected as a kid. He takes out something that looks like a small radio receiver. He takes a small screwdriver out of the toolkit he keeps in the glove compartment, and starts poking at the gadget.

His fingers are incredibly dexterous. Obviously, when he was a kid, he used to take advantage of the school's workroom and fiddle with wires all the time... if Zhao Yunlan weren't a fickle spendthrift, one could totally imagine that being with a man like him meant no new electrical appliances needed, ever.

The two drive in silence for a while, and as Shen Wei's anger subsides, he quickly becomes regretful. Most people are pretentious and uptight in front of strangers, but relaxed and genuine with their loved ones. But Shen Wei is the exact opposite; he has gotten too used to restraining his emotions in front of Zhao Yunlan. He's always afraid that Zhao Yunlan will sense something of his deplorable nature. Sometimes, Shen Wei doesn't even know what to say to Zhao Yunlan... he always feels filthy and disgraceful, unworthy of him.

Zhao Yunlan has been fiddling with his gadget for a while, and hasn't said a word the whole time. When they're stopped at a red light, Shen Wei finally steals a glance at Zhao Yunlan, and whispers hesitantly, "What are you doing?"

Luckily, Zhao Yunlan is quick to forgive and forget; he hasn't taken what happened before to heart. He explains excitedly, "This is a transceiver I built as a kid. I'm fixing the broken parts... stop at that supermarket up ahead, I gotta buy some batteries."

Zhao Yunlan gets out of the car to buy his batteries.



The transceiver has a small monitor with a screen size of no more than five centimetres. When he puts the batteries in, it lights up with a buzzing sound. There's a faintly glowing dot on the screen, barely visible. Zhao Yunlan shields the screen with his hands and leans in close to be able to make it out.

He slowly changes the frequency and adjusts the size of the dot, comparing the settings with some hand-etched markings on the side that nobody but him understands. After a while, he says, "Uh, not that far. Seems to be avoiding us. Let's turn back."

Shen Wei makes a U-turn, while Zhao Yunlan leans close to his small screen and gives instructions. "Turn left at the next intersection. When I was a kid, I turned this old radio transceiver into a tracker."

"What does it track?" Shen Wei seems to be quite interested, although he probably doesn't even understand what "radio" means.

"It tracks my dad. I put a signal generator in his phone. Who'd have thought he'd still be using the same phone after all these years?" Zhao Yunlan wonders. "I was still in high school and didn't quite understand the science behind it, and my workmanship wasn't particularly good, either. It jumps around a lot, finding the frequency takes ages, and it loses track if the signal is too far away."

Shen Wei can't help but touch his pocket as he thinks of his age-old phone that he never uses. He doesn't even manage to answer it sometimes, or to end a call... if someone did something to it, he wouldn't be able to tell.

Zhao Yunlan sees what's going on. He crosses his legs and takes his time lighting a cigarette. "Don't worry, I won't put anything on you as long as you don't cheat on me with some young pretty boy."

Shen Wei shoots him an annoyed glare.

"Left, left. Yes, that teahouse. I see my old man's car." Zhao Yunlan's voice seems lighthearted, but his expression is gloomy. "Today I must find out just who this man who raised me is."

Shen Wei has barely stopped the car when Zhao Yunlan has already undone his seatbelt and jumps out of the car. He sets off at an easy pace and bounds up the stairs to the second floor.

Shen Wei locks the car and adjusts his glasses before he follows suit with measured steps. Calm and composed, he even nods towards the waitress before he goes up the stairs.

The waitress is only in her twenties. On seeing him, her hands start trembling so much that the teapot she's carrying falls to the floor and shatters.

Zhao Yunlan's father sits with his back facing the door. He turns around when he hears something, his gaze calm and distant behind his glasses.

Zhao Yunlan's steps falter, but then he strides forward again. He shakes his head at the waiter performing the tea ceremony, signalling him to leave. Once the waiter is gone, Zhao Yunlan sits down opposite his father. He asks in a low voice, "You're not my dad, who are you?"

'Zhao Yunlan's father' doesn't answer, he keeps looking towards the stairs with a stern expression and watches Shen Wei making his way up. The two lock eyes, and after some hesitation, Shen Wei nods politely. "Sir."

'Zhao Yunlan's father's eyes flash; his expression tightens, the smile wrinkles on his face deepening. After a while, he replies in a neutral tone, "You're too kind."

Wearing a barely noticeable smile, Shen Wei pointedly doesn't sit down at the table. He walks past them and sits on a chair to the side, a few steps away from the two. He picks up a new cup, rinses it with some hot water, and fills it up with tea. He doesn't look up; he clearly doesn't intend to join the conversation.

Zhao Yunlan says, "I was a drunken fool that day, otherwise I would've realised you're fake just from your eyes... My father has been ambitious all his life. He's clearly a beast in disguise, only interested in position and wealth. He really doesn't have your refinement. You tricked me into calling you dad a few times, and I can let that slide. I'll only ask you two questions: where's my dad? And how are you connected to Shennong? Could it be that... you're Shennong himself?"

'Zhao Yunlan's father' moves his lips, but for whatever reason, doesn't say anything. After a while, he lowers his eyes and glances sideways at Shen Wei. He takes a sip of tea, but still makes no sound.

Zhao Yunlan's patience is finally running out. Tapping his finger on the table, he raises his eyebrow and intones every word slowly, "Hey mister, I'm only so civil with you because you might be related to Shennong, one of the Three Sovereigns. But if you're this disrespectful... as a son, I owe it to my dad not to ignore this."

"I'm not Shennong." After a good long while, 'Zhao Yunlan's father' continues in a low voice, "And your father<sup>148</sup> is fine. I only borrow his body once in a while, and afterwards I always leave useful memories for him. I never interfere with his affairs."

"Then what are you?" Zhao Yunlan asks.

'Zhao Yunlan's father' smiles. "I'm only a medicine bowl the great Shennong left behind. During the war of gods, by some sheer luck I

completed cultivation and became a minor deity. If I was any inconvenience to Lord Kunlun, I am truly sorry."

"What are you doing in my dad's body? Are you connected to the memories I saw in the Holy Tree?" To Zhao Yunlan, whether he's a deity or something else has no bearing, he doesn't see much of a difference between people and gods. He seems to be falling back on old habits, treating everyone like a criminal during an interrogation.

'Zhao Yunlan's father' raises his eyebrows, and asks slowly, "Kunlun... how did you find out that the memories inside the Holy Tree aren't your true memories at all?"

"I'm not that childish zombie who works for me, nor am I the Monkey King, either." Zhao Yunlan treats the good tea as if it were water, draining his cup in a single gulp. "I might be a bit wild sometimes, but most of the time, I'm easy-going. If there's anything that can force me to rebel, it must be for a very good reason, making me tremendously angry. But why didn't I feel anything while watching, except sorrow?"

'Zhao Yunlan's father' nods in agreement. "That makes sense."

"Besides, I just cannot believe I would do something so simple and violent like puncturing a hole into the sky out of anger," Zhao Yunlan continues. "After all, Kunlun was born master of the mountains and rivers, the protector of life on Earth. For all my past and present lives I've always been an animal rights activist. I'd never stab the godly dragon in the eye."

'Zhao Yunlan's father' smiles lightly and doesn't speak.

Zhao Yunlan's gaze grows cold. "So I want to know, why did you mislead me using the Holy Tree?"

'Zhao Yunlan's father' sighs. "Perhaps when Lord Kunlun considers the long term..."

"Don't give me that bullshit," Zhao Yunlan interrupts. "Talk like a human, I'm running out of patience. If you make me angry, I don't care whose broken bowl you are, you're gonna be in real pain."

'Zhao Yunlan's father' looks at him, and then his gaze shifts slightly, falling on Shen Wei who's flipping through a magazine. Suddenly, his body trembles all over and his eyes seem to lose focus for a second. Once they become clear again, his gaze... no, his entire person has changed.

Zhao Yunlan's father massages his temples and frowns. He looks at Zhao Yunlan and asks in confusion, "What were you saying? I've been a bit tired recently and can't concentrate well."

Zhao Yunlan flinches. Immediately, he transforms from a ferocious gangster to a juvenile delinquent. His posture droops, and after a while, he whispers softly, "Dad?"

Zhao Yunlan's father frowns. "Hm?"

That expression speaks a thousand words. Zhao Yunlan can clearly decipher its complex message: "Say whatever crap you need to say. I'll give you a minute, but only because you're my son. I'm dead tired and don't want to listen to your bullshit."

Zhao Yunlan immediately uses Shen Wei as his excuse. "Oh, it's nothing. It's just that we'd agreed to meet, but you weren't home, so I've brought him here to meet you."

"I had something to do last-minute, came here to meet a friend," Zhao Yunlan's father murmurs, and then awkwardly turns to look at Shen Wei. Even with detailed scrutiny, he can't find anything to nitpick, owing to Professor Shen's gentlemanly charisma. Finally, he greets him perfunctorily and forces out, "I haven't been a good host. I hope Professor Shen won't take it to heart."

Shen Wei very politely greets him back.

Zhao Yunlan takes out a paper talisman, a deity repellent. He secretly folds it into a triangle behind his back, and then pushes it towards his father. "And also, I went to the temple two days ago to get you a protective talisman. Don't open it, keep it on your person."

Zhao Yunlan's father unsuspectingly accepts it.

And yet, nothing happens. The deity-repelling talisman doesn't react at all. Zhao Yunlan instantly frowns... has that broken bowl run away, or is it so strong that even an advanced talisman like this has no effect?

## Chapter 81

Finally, unable to catch the 'broken bowl god' in time, Zhao Yunlan withdraws from his father's powerful aura. His father seems uncomfortable seeing Shen Wei, and when he's uncomfortable for long, he'll start to make life for others around him uncomfortable, too.

Zhao Yunlan feels quite embarrassed by this. He continues mumbling as they get in the car. "Most people only get possessed by beautiful fox spirits. Only someone as shitty as him would attract a broken bowl, of all things... he must have been a beggar in his past life, or a bald monk taking his crappy bowl everywhere."

"It's fine, don't worry. Shennong's followers are known for their kindness; they wouldn't harm humans for no reason. Besides, haven't you put a marker on him already? I'll keep an eye on him for you."

Zhao Yunlan cackles. "Hehe, that's a good idea. We aren't even married yet, but you're already being troubled by that jerk of a father-in-law."

He really doesn't bear grudges. He has already forgotten about Shen Wei's outrage earlier, and is already flirting again.

Zhao Yunlan's plan was to invite Shen Wei to watch a movie; it's Valentine's Day after all. But perhaps it's too warm in the car with the heater turned up; he unwittingly falls asleep. Just before drifting away into slumber, Zhao Yunlan wonders: he hasn't been doing anything much recently, so why does he tire so easily?

Perhaps he's coming down with a cold.

His sleep isn't restful; he's assaulted by dream after dream. There always seems to be someone shrouded in white mist, incessantly repeating, "You fail to consider the long term. You fail to tell right from wrong, good from evil, life from death..."

The words wheel back and forth through his mind, and soon Zhao Yunlan can't help but wonder: what really are life and death?

The endless torture gets louder and louder. Zhao Yunlan knows he's dreaming, but for the life of him, he just cannot wake up. These repeating dreams seem to keep him trapped like a bottomless swamp: the more he struggles to break free, the more they pull him under and suffocate him.

Until someone pushes a bowl against his mouth, its stench overpowering. He tries to jerk away, but his head is held in place, his mouth is forced open again, and the medicine is poured into it. Zhao Yunlan instinctively resists, refusing to swallow, and trying to push the thick liquid away with his tongue. Then, he discerns a familiar scent. Soft lips touch his, and he lets the medicine flow down his throat after all.

Zhao Yunlan finally breaks free from his dream and finds himself home, in bed. He has no idea how he got there. Shen Wei puts down the bowl, and brings a cup of tea just the right temperature. Foreheads touching, Shen Wei says tenderly, "Come on, drink some to clear the taste."

Zhao Yunlan stares at him quietly, taking the cup. His long eyelashes are sticky and pointing downwards, cold sweat from his nightmare is still beading on his forehead.

He downs the whole cup, and says dully, "Don't know why I'm always so tired lately."

Shen Wei hesitates. "You're probably exhausted after going inside the Holy Tree."



"Oh." Zhao Yunlan suddenly looks up with a suggestive glance, and deliberately draws out the words, "And I thought maaaayyybeeeee..."

Shen Wei's spine stiffens.

"... I was pregnant with your child," that fool sing-songs.

Shen Wei's hands tremble, and he almost drops both bowl and cup to the floor. He quickly scrambles away.

When Zhao Yunlan reaches for his phone to check what time it is, he finds he has an email from Wang Zheng with a brief case description: in a rich suburban area about 300 km away from Dragon City, a resident found a dead body when he went into the woods early for his morning exercise: its complexion purple, face frozen in a horrified expression, hand wrapped around a black dog's neck, both man and dog already cold.

Wang Zheng reminds him with professional courtesy, "It's almost the 7th of January."

Legend says that the 7th day of the first month is everyone's birthday, and there are tricks for borrowing people's lifespans.

Folklore teaches that the blood of a black dog can be used to communicate between the living and the dead. The horoscope readings of the recipient and the donor are written in dog's blood on a piece of paper, as well as the number of years borrowed. Four incense candles are placed at the corners of the paper; if they stand upright, that means a demon has taken the bribe. Then, without looking, the paper has to be burned immediately, the borrower has to swallow the ashes, and the ritual is done.

In olden times, usually when old people got ill, their children or grandchildren might willingly lend their lifespans. But nowadays,

people have forgotten about these rituals; only selfish cowards without a clue sometimes cobble together the recipe to try and steal other people's lives.

In the past, if the voluntary ritual failed and the ill person passed away nonetheless, the child or grandchild would burn incense and pray, and perform another ritual to get back their lifespan. But stealing is very different. If successful, the Taoist priest who helped with the ritual would have made money at the expense of his Yin virtue. If unsuccessful, it could backfire and cost the life of whoever performed the ritual.

A human corpse next to that of a black dog is not a rare sight near the 7th of January. SIU has several of these cases every year. Zhao Yunlan forwards the message to everyone, and asks that whoever is free go and take a look.

Before he finishes typing, his eyelids begin to droop. He holds on just long enough to hit send. Then, like a black-out, he drops on the bed and is asleep before he can even count one sheep.

When Zhu Hong receives the message, she's meditating on the roof. Her long snake tail is lying uncurled as she tries to catch as much of the faint moonlight as possible. Northern cities are quite the trouble, the sun rarely shows itself in winter; if it's not foggy, it's snowing. Moonlit nights are rare and precious opportunities for a moment of meditation.

Zhu Hong opens her eyes, but before she can look at her phone, she's shocked to find a man sitting opposite her. "Fourth Uncle?"

Her Fourth Uncle looks at her and says, "Years ago, you failed in your cultivation, and were maimed by Heavenly Thunder. I left you under the care of the Guardian, in the hopes that his yang energy could protect you. It seems he has taken good care of you."

With a wave of his hand, he makes a small pavilion appear on the windy rooftop. Inside there's a big wooden tea tray, with a water pot sitting on top of a small burning stove, and a teapot next to it, already filled with tea leaves. Fourth Uncle waves Zhu Hong inside. "Come on."

Her snake tail turns into legs, and she walks over to the pavilion, quickly skimming Zhao Yunlan's message. She hesitantly says, "The Guardian says there's a case..."

"A life stealer got what he deserved, that's all." Fourth Uncle glances at the message, and continues unperturbed, "I've come to see you because there's something I need to discuss with you."

Of course, her Fourth Uncle is the leader of the Snake Tribe – he's always benevolent, but never easy to read. He would never 'discuss' anything with anyone, as he would have made up his mind already; the 'discussing' is merely a formality.

Zhu Hong can't help sitting up straighter.

Fourth Uncle pours hot water into the teapot and calmly begins to speak, enveloped by the rising vapour, "Dragon City isn't the right place for cultivation. Of the few shifters who come to our Tribes Market, most live out in the surrounding urban areas. You haven't achieved much in the past 20 years; I don't have to tell you that, I'm sure you're aware."

Zhu Hong takes a cup of tea, and tentatively asks, "So what you're saying is, you want me to move to the suburbs?"

Seeing that she's playing dumb, Fourth Uncle doesn't beat around the bush. He smiles and says, "I want you to leave Dragon City."

"But the Guardian Order..."

"I left you under the care of the Guardian, and you worked for him in return, but you're not bound by the Order. If you want to leave, you can do so anytime."

Zhu Hong bites her lips.

"What now, you don't want to leave him?" Fourth Uncle is always amiable when he speaks, the corners of his mouth raised into a warm smile, like a buddha statue at a temple. Yet his expression is overbearing. "If you still see me as your uncle, listen to me and just leave with me immediately. If there were a place for you in his heart, I'd hate to be a killjoy. But you know what's really in his heart, don't you?"

Zhu Hong stays silent.

Fourth Uncle knocks on the table lightly. "You've always been a smart kid growing up. That's all I'll say, no need to go into more detail. You know what to do."

Zhu Hong's fingers twitch and tighten around her phone, blue veins bulging on the back of her hand. The poor electronic device isn't designed to withstand this; with a cracking sound, its back cover comes loose, and its screen splinters into a spider web and dies.

Fourth Uncle sits there calmly with his back straight and his eyes on his tea. He's in no hurry to urge her.

After a long while, Zhu Hong says quietly, "I'm handling the current case for him... once this case is wrapped up, I'll personally ask to resign. Is that okay?"

Fourth Uncle knows to quit while he's ahead and nods agreeably. "Yes, always finish what you start."

Then, he takes out a small box and opens it. There's a brilliantly gleaming pearl inside. "This is a water dragon pearl. It brings good

fortune, and protects against fire and water. Give this to the Guardian when you leave. He took such good care of you all these years, the entire tribe owes him. This is just a small gift."

Zhu Hong takes the box and is about to say thanks, but Fourth Uncle vanishes in the blink of an eye.

The moon is radiant, but her heart is in chaos. She's in no mood to meditate any longer. She cleans up the mess that's left of her phone, retrieves the SIM card, and slithers back into the night.

At midnight, Zhao Yunlan receives Zhu Hong's message: "I'm going with Lin Jing. Don't forget it's double-pay for overtime."

Shen Wei is a very light sleeper. Sometimes Zhao Yunlan suspects he doesn't sleep at all. Ever since he moved in, Zhao Yunlan's been afraid of disturbing him, so he normally turns his phone to vibrate mode and puts it on the nightstand by his side of the bed. But tonight, he fell asleep so quickly, he had no time to put away his phone, so he fell asleep holding it.

When his phone vibrates in his palm, he wakes up without a sound.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't check the message. Instead, he instinctively holds his breath and turns around to see if Shen Wei is awake. But he finds the other side of the bed empty. He reaches out to touch the duvet; it's already cold, Shen Wei must've left a while ago.

Zhao Yunlan sits up and rubs his eyes. He sees that the light is on in the kitchen. With his feet, he feels around on the floor for his slippers for a bit, but they must have been kicked somewhere out of reach. So he heads towards the light barefoot.

Shen Wei has his back turned, and there seems to be something cooking in a small clay pot on the stove next to him. There's a faint medicinal aroma. What kind of medicine could it be that has to be

stewed overnight? Zhao Yunlan blinks, and rolls up his sleeves, only half-awake. "What are you making? I'll help..."

Shen Wei jumps, startled by the sound of his voice, and a knife falls to the floor. Its tip gleams with fresh blood, which spatters all across the snow-white cupboard. Zhao Yunlan stops mid-sentence, his irises refocus, and he's instantly fully awake. That blade... was inside Shen Wei's chest just a moment ago.

Shen Wei's face is as pale as paper. Seconds tick by, and one could've heard a pin drop in the kitchen.

Suddenly, Zhao Yunlan stomps forward in large strides, grabs Shen Wei by the shoulder, and ruthlessly rips apart Shen Wei's clothes—the stab wound on Shen Wei's pale chest has already healed without a trace, but there are still blood stains on his pyjamas. Zhao Yunlan feels as though the knife had been stabbed into his own chest; he can't move, it hurts so much. Very carefully, he reaches out and touches his fingers to Shen Wei's seemingly unharmed chest. After a while, he asks in a barely audible voice, "What's going on?"

Shen Wei stands in silence.

Zhao Yunlan pulls him in by the collar and raises his voice. "I asked you what's happening, answer me!"

He shoves him, and Shen Wei's waist hits the edge of the kitchen worktop with a loud thud. Zhao Yunlan is short-tempered around others, but he's never even raised his voice towards Shen Wei, let alone lost his temper. His anger towards others is mostly fake, too, quickly spent in a few sharp words. He never would've expected Shen Wei to bring out genuine anger in him.

At this moment, Zhao Yunlan understands how Shen Wei felt when he used the Shadow Blitz at the hospital, and why Shen Wei almost slapped him across the face back then. His throat closes up, and for a moment, he can't get any air. His mind is a total blank. Eventually,

he hears himself ask, "What have you been feeding me? Shen Wei! Look at me! You fucking answer me right now!"

"All those years ago... you lost the soul fire from your left shoulder, and you poured out blood from your heart to make the wick for the Lantern of the Guardian," Shen Wei replies at last. "You spent too much life energy, your soul is unstable. You made me a god, but I was born from filth nonetheless. If you spend too much time with me, you will begin to lose strength, and the longer it goes on, the more your energy will decline, until one day, you will be consumed by me, completely sucked dry."<sup>149</sup>

Shen Wei quickly drops his gaze and lowers his lashes, black like raven feathers. He closes his eyes, inked in the deepest black, and says almost inaudibly, "Thousands of years ago, Shennong said that I am destined to an end just as miserable as my beginning. I was born Ghost King, and will always be, and if you insist on protecting me and staying with me, one day I will kill you."

Like a hypodermic needle, these words instantly suck all the strength from Zhao Yunlan's body. He lets go of Shen Wei and stumbles backwards, almost knocking over the small pot on the stove.

"The 'medicine' I drank... had blood from your heart." Zhao Yunlan's lips are trembling violently. "And this is supposed to be my 'life support'?"<sup>150</sup>

Shen Wei looks at him and smiles softly. "Even my soul is black. My heart, the part of me that belongs to you, is the only clean thing about me, where the blood is still red. I want to use it to protect you."

Zhao Yunlan is staring at the floor. After a moment, he throws his head back and covers his eyes with his hands.

If Shen Wei didn't love him, or was indifferent to him, Zhao Yunlan would be free to choose: continue their relationship, or leave at his

leisure. Both would be reasonable.

If Shen Wei lied to him, harmed him, or let him down, again Zhao Yunlan would be free to choose: forgive him, or never see him again. Both would be reasonable.

But Shen Wei is like a spider that has trapped him in a most ambivalent place—a place where he can't say anything, can't scold him, can't hate him, but can't accept him either.

For a long time, he says nothing. Then he takes a thick jacket from the cloak rack, puts it on, and heads out the door.

As it turns out, there's indeed a kind of love that's like a knife to the heart.<sup>151</sup>



## Chapter 82

For administrative purposes, off-site work requires the logistics department to arrange transport. So before the sun rises, Zhu Hong and Lin Jing head to No. 4 Bright Avenue to find Wang Zheng. As they enter the front door, they see their Chief curled up on the sofa, still in his pyjamas, and covered in a thick wool jacket which is obviously not his style.

Da Qing is crouched in front of the sofa, facing a bowl with some leftover bits of fish in it and contentedly licking his paws.

Zhu Hong tiptoes in and whispers, "Why is he sleeping here? Isn't it cold, won't he catch a cold?"

She turns up the air conditioning and takes off her down jacket to cover Zhao Yunlan.

After the New Year celebrations, Lin Jing looks blown up like a balloon, having grown a whole new spare tyre. He rubs his dumpling-like chin and says, "Not going home to his family for the New Year is a sure sign of some relationship situation he's keeping quiet. Either they're pressuring him into getting married, or pressuring him to break up with someone."

Just then, Zhao Yunlan wakes and raises his head, with bed hair and dark circles around his eyes. Obviously annoyed at having been rudely awakened, he throws a menacing glare Lin Jing's way and barks, "Shut up and fuck off!"

Lin Jing has always been impertinent. After two seconds of silence, he can't help but continue, "No way, how can anyone stand a guy like you... when your wife wakes you up in the morning and calls you to a lovingly cooked breakfast, is that how you react as well?"

Zhao Yunlan grabs a bonsai from the cabinet and hurls it towards him. A loud crash follows.

Da Qing and Zhu Hong stare at each other in silence.

Even Lin Jing is stunned for a moment. Seeing that it was his loud mouth that made Zhao Yunlan explode, he has no choice but to quietly find a broom to sweep up the aftermath. "Amitabha, may the pieces rest in peace," he mumbles to himself.

Da Qing hops onto the couch and paws Zhao Yunlan's shoulder, "Hey, you okay?"

Zhao Yunlan takes two deep breaths and lies down again. He buries his face in the jacket. It's Shen Wei's. He only realised this problem after he left; the collar still carries his clean and pleasant scent.

After a good while, Zhao Yunlan mumbles sullenly, "I'm fine... Leave it, Lin Jing, I'll clean it up later. I wasn't mad at you... I'm not feeling well, just let me lie here for a while. Go do whatever you came for."

Da Qing's whiskers quiver; Zhao Yunlan brusquely ruffles the fur on his head and pats the fat cat on the butt half-heartedly. "If you're free, help me find out where the *Record of Ancient Secrets* came from."

"Always ordering around your cat ancestor," Da Qing huffs, annoyed. "What about my red envelope? Where's my lucky money?"

Zhao Yunlan, with his eyes still shut, digs around for cash in Shen Wei's jacket. He finds some small change and stuffs it under the cat's collar, then dismisses him with a wave of his hand. "You really have some nerve. No-one could afford it if you got a penny for every year you've been on Earth, old man. Go on, shoo."

Da Qing tries to sharpen his claws on Zhao Yunlan's jacket, but Zhao Yunlan's hand shoots out, blocking him swiftly. Da Qing's claws touch warm human skin instead and retract. They still leave white marks on Zhao Yunlan's arm.

Being denied even the right to sharpen his claws, Da Qing is dumbfounded for a moment and then runs off in a huff. This big bastard Zhao Yunlan has used him, a high-class, elegant cat, like a fare box on a bus!

There are many customs surrounding the New Year and the Spring Festival. Since most of the SIU staff aren't human, they all have different ways of spending the New Year. Therefore, if there's nothing urgent to do, they won't even bother coming back to work until after the 15th. During this time, No. 4 Bright Avenue is practically empty all day. Zhao Yunlan is still sad and upset about Shen Wei and decides to lose himself in sleep until then. He falls asleep and only wakes when it's close to noon<sup>152</sup>.

When he wakes up, even the black cat has left him. All is quiet in the office. The down jacket is almost lying on the floor, Zhao Yunlan must have kicked it off. He picks it up and dusts it off, then rubs his eyes and blankly stares into space. He left the house in such a rush, hurriedly stepping into a pair of shoes, not even donning socks before running off, that he only realised when he got outside that he picked his leather loafers. They're a bit cold.

Looking down, he notices a pair of boots he often wears, with a pair of socks stuffed inside, sitting on the floor next to him. A set of ironed clothes have been placed on the armrest of the couch, underwear tucked neatly inside them, and on top are his phone, keys and wallet... but his benefactor didn't bring a jacket; he probably wants Zhao Yunlan to keep wearing the jacket he put on before.

Someone suddenly says, "Professor Shen brought those over. I was gonna wake you, but he didn't let me."

Zhao Yunlan sees Zhu Hong at her desk, wasting time on the Internet.

"Where's Shen Wei?"

"He left." Zhu Hong looks away from the monitor.

Zhao Yunlan's voice is a little hoarse. "Where to? What else did he say?"

Without any personal touch, Zhu Hong relays his words: "Oh, he said it's cold outside, you should go home when you're done working. And you needn't worry about seeing him at yours, he's gone back to his own place." She adds, "Then he left, probably went back home. So why did the two of you pick a fight during the New Year?"

Zhao Yunlan doesn't answer. He knows where 'his own place' really is: not Shen Wei's apartment, like Zhu Hong thinks. The thought hurts like a knife being twisted in his heart; but since he's not alone, he keeps a straight face.

After a while, Zhao Yunlan sits up and puts on his socks. He heads to the bathroom to change out of his pyjamas and hurriedly wash up. Arms against the sink, he stares at the snow-white porcelain pool for a while, and then buries his face in the freezing water.

For a moment, he dares not think about Shen Wei. For the first time in his life, he understands how just thinking about someone can feel like your heart is being torn out.

He stays in the bathroom so long that Zhu Hong starts to worry. She walks to the bathroom and knocks on the door. "Chief Zhao, you okay?"

Zhao Yunlan responds with an affirmative sound and wipes the water droplets off his face. He finds his toiletry bag he keeps at the office in

case he has to work overnight, and shaves carefully in front of the mirror. Fixing his clothes so he looks like a civilised person again, he straightens his back and walks out.

He knows that heartache never solves any problems. He has to find the clue in this tangled mess right now.

Zhu Hong is waiting for him at the door. She starts to say something, but Zhao Yunlan asks calmly, "Is there anything to eat? I'm hungry."

Zhu Hong blinks. "The canteen should have some food, you want to go and check?"

Zhao Yunlan nods and goes straight to the second floor. Zhu Hong is shocked... the normal Zhao Yunlan would sit at his desk and go "get me a bowl of congee". Rarely would he condescend to go to the canteen himself.

Zhao Yunlan gets a regular breakfast set from the canteen and silently sits down to eat. He's strangely calm. Zhu Hong follows him quietly, thinking that even if the sky were to collapse, he would probably just lift his eyes for a moment, and then keep eating his congee. She gets even more nervous.

Only after Zhao Yunlan has emptied the whole tray and filled his stomach, he finally feels a bit of warmth in his numb limbs again and gives Zhu Hong a strange look, "Why did you come to the office today?"

After a moment of silence, Zhu Hong replies, "I was going to take the train with Lin Jing to look at the black dog and corpse."

"Oh, then why didn't you?"

"I was worried about you, so I had him go alone."

Zhao Yunlan wipes his mouth and picks up the tray. He says indifferently, "What's there to worry about me? I'm fine, just go home."

Zhu Hong just follows him without a word.

Zhao Yunlan goes back to his office and turns on his computer like any normal day. He glances at Zhu Hong. "What are you still doing here?"

"What's going on with you?"

Zhao Yunlan takes a lighter and cigarettes out of his desk drawer and says lightly, "Nothing."

But Zhu Hong won't let it go. She asks again, insistently, "If nothing's wrong, why didn't you go home? Why did you run away in the middle of the night and sleep in your office?"

"Ah," Zhao Yunlan sucks the white smoke deep into his lungs. "We just had a little tiff last night."

"Bullshit," Zhu Hong says, her eyebrows shooting up. She accuses him bluntly, "You think everyone's blind? You treat that Shen guy like he's your heart and soul; if you only quarrelled over something trivial<sup>153</sup>, you'd have long hauled ass back home and groveled, and written a ten-thousand word apology on top of that, so why are you still here spouting nonsense to me?"

Zhao Yunlan has nothing to say to that.

"Did he do something to hurt you?" She glares, her eyes lighting up as if, at the slightest hint from Zhao Yunlan, she'd go and swallow Shen Wei whole.

"Don't talk crap." Zhao Yunlan flicks away some ash. "Why are you so nosy? Nosy women can't get married."

Zhu Hong says gloomily, "The person I like doesn't like me back, I'm not gonna get married anyway, so what does it matter?"

Zhao Yunlan understands what she means, but can only pretend not to. Again, he's left with nothing to say, so he decides to flee, his dignity be damned. He grabs his briefcase, stuffs his wallet and phone inside, and without even switching off the computer, turns around and marches out.

But Zhu Hong has no intention of letting him go; she follows right behind. "What are you doing?"

"I'm meeting with a higher-up in the ministry." Zhao Yunlan glares at her. "Why are you still following me?"

He unlocks the car, and Zhu Hong rapidly gets into the passenger seat. She snaps the seat belt on and sits there, immovable as a mountain<sup>154</sup>. "I'm coming along."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't know what to say; he stands at the car door, sighing. "Esteemed elder, will you spare me?"

Zhu Hong ignores him and looks away.

The two stare at each other in silence for a good while, but Zhu Hong refuses to budge. In the end, Zhao Yunlan takes a deep breath, restrains his exasperation, puts his cigarette out, and gets in the car.

He drives in silence. Zhu Hong secretly glances at him several times. All she sees is his handsome and cool profile. Finally, she can't help but ask, "Who is this higher-up?"

"Little Guo's uncle," Zhao Yunlan says. "Right, about that. Can you help me find out who pulled the strings to get Guo Changcheng transferred to our team?"

"Pulled the strings? To transfer Guo Changcheng? What can he do? What for?"

Zhao Yunlan says nothing.

He actually suspects that the bowl possessing his father must have orchestrated it, but what for? And why Guo Changcheng? He has good virtue, a lot more than average, but there's nothing else special about him, or is there? Looking at the whole SIU team, Little Guo seems like the most human; or is there something hidden about him?

If possible, Zhao Yunlan wants to retrieve the power and true memories of Lord Kunlun. If not, at least he must find out what's truthful and what isn't. He has to get to the bottom of all this; he cannot rush in blind.

Shen Wei... the name alone makes Zhao Yunlan feel like there's a fire raging in his heart, eating away at his strength. But he must endure and appear calm, like a fisherman in a storm<sup>155</sup>. As soon as nobody's around, though, he can feel his brow start to furrow, and it only takes a few minutes before he's frowning intensely.

There's a recurring scene in his mind: in a deep and freezing darkness, half of Shen Wei's body is engulfed in oblivion. His head is raised, searching for a glimpse of deep blue sky beyond. But his gaze cannot penetrate the never-ending black, and finally he loses hope and lets the darkness swallow him up.

Suddenly, someone shoves Zhao Yunlan, and he wakes up. His heart is pounding like thunder; his forehead is covered in cold sweat.

It's Zhu Hong. She says, expressionless and somewhat displeased, "We've arrived."



Zhao Yunlan's mind goes blank for a moment, before he realises that it was a dream... he had a few drinks with Guo Changcheng's uncle, and Zhu Hong drove on the way back; he must have fallen asleep in the passenger seat.

Zhu Hong sits motionless. "What were you dreaming about? You were screaming Shen Wei's name like your heart was being torn out<sup>156</sup>."

Zhao Yunlan is embarrassed to have exposed himself. He doesn't want to have this conversation, so he pretends not to have heard.

"Yunlan!" Zhu Hong calls out before he can leave the car.

Zhao Yunlan freezes.

She takes out a small box. She has tied a red string around the water dragon pearl, with a good-luck knot on top. "A gift from my uncle, to thank you for your long-standing support of the Snake Tribe. I... I'm gonna leave with him soon."

Zhao Yunlan frowns slightly. "Leave? Where will you go?"

"Not sure. Probably back to the tribe." Zhu Hong smiles bleakly. When she realises that Zhao Yunlan makes no move to take it, she puts the red string around his neck and carefully centres the pearl. "This is a sacred item of our tribe. It'll protect you from fire and water and keep you safe. If there's anything you want me to do, you better tell me now, there isn't much time left."

After a while, Zhao Yunlan says, "Dragon City isn't a good place for cultivation. It's better if you go back to the tribe, you'll be further away from humans, and there'll be fewer distractions. Your uncle is an important figure. Learn from him, and who knows, maybe you'll be the next leader of the Snake Tribe."

His voice sounds like he's delivering an obituary, calm and sad. Zhu Hong says impulsively, "Chief Zhao, just say the word and I'll cut ties with the tribe. I'll walk through fire with you<sup>157</sup> and stay with you forever."

She waits for his response anxiously, as if her life depended on it.

But Zhao Yunlan avoids her gaze and smiles self-deprecatingly. "We've known each other so long, and we're good friends. How could I trap you here forever? I'm relieved to know you'll be fine."

The brilliance in Zhu Hong's eyes dims at once.

Zhao Yunlan has already stepped out of the car.

## Chapter 83

Da Qing has almost scratched a hole into the floor of the SIU when he finally sees Zhao Yunlan and Zhu Hong come in one after the other.

Although the atmosphere between those two is obviously strained, Da Qing thinks that as a cat, it's better to ignore emotions between humans. So he picks up the *Record of Ancient Secrets* with his teeth, as if it were a mouse, and deposits it at Zhao Yunlan's feet. "This book has a strong aura of death. I checked, it really came from Antique Street."

Zhao Yunlan silently picks up the book and wipes off the cat spittle. "Antique Street?"

'Antique Street', as the name implies, specialises in all kinds of antiques and artefacts. Although most of them are fakes, sometimes they're mixed with illegally unearthed Ming dynasty treasures.

But this *Record of Ancient Secrets* is obviously a photocopy. No halfway intelligent human would think it was a cultural relic. What Da Qing calls an 'aura of death' probably refers to something else – something most people don't know. The shop in Antique Street, besides selling all kinds of feudal superstition supplies, also tends to a big pagoda tree at its door.

To put it in Zhao Yunlan's words, the big pagoda tree is a transportation hub. Like a bus station, providing transport to all sorts of different places. You can go from the human world to the Tribes Market, for example, or from the human world to the Underworld; all the roads go through this hub.

The big branches and leaves of the tree are connected to the human world, while its big roots are anchored in the Underworld. It belongs to neither humans nor ghosts.

Zhao Yunlan looks up at the black cat. "So you're saying this book is from the Underworld?"

The black cat gives a haughty little nod.

Zhao Yunlan asks, "Who bought it?"

The black cat licks his paw. "I don't know; I can't find the purchase record. Maybe it was the previous—"

"That's impossible." Zhao Yunlan flips through the book. There's no serial number and no publishing house information. "Going by the print layout and the quality of the paper, it's relatively new. It must have been bought after I took over. My last life was too long ago."

Da Qing says meaningfully, "Well, then we can conclude it came in with the cat food."

He means to say, someone smuggled it in. They must have known the *Record of Ancient Secrets* very well; even the sealing spell placed on the four pillars is transcribed accurately.

The SIU's book collection is very well organised. The spines of the books carry colour labels and codes. That's why Sang Zan, who can't read, can put the books back on their correct shelves. So why was the *Record of Ancient Secrets* sandwiched in the 'Nüwa made man and mended the sky' section?

"This is actually a 'black leather book'," Da Qing says. So-called 'black leather books' are books obtained by night shift workers, from non-human places. 'White leather books', on the other hand, come from the human world.

Da Qing stretches out his claws as if to flip the book open, but the moment he touches it, a black miasma flows from the pages. "It's so secret that we haven't even labelled it. If you want to check it out, I suggest we explore Antique Street tonight."

At nightfall, Zhao Yunlan finally can't hold back anymore and makes a phone call to Shen Wei. There's a cold mechanical female voice at the other end. "The number you've dialled is not in the service area..."

He stares at the screen of his mobile phone for a moment, tasting the meaning of 'one day apart seems like three years', until Da Qing comes and pushes his elbow with an impatient paw.

"Stop fantasising <sup>158</sup>, get going."

He picks up his prodigal kitten and leaves with him. When he gets outside, he finds Zhu Hong already standing next to his car, waiting for him silently.

She catches his eye and says self-deprecatingly, "You must think I'm pretty cheap, still following you around after what you said."

For a moment Zhao Yunlan doesn't know how to respond. Then he says, "I just want to remind you to wear a warm down coat."

The two people and the cat are sitting in the car. In the middle of the night, the atmosphere during the drive is extremely awkward. When they finally arrive at Antique Street, they walk up to the big pagoda tree.

Zhao Yunlan glances over to the shop next to the tree. He sees two faded paper lanterns framing the door, giving off bright halos of light. The paper has been torn by the wind, and the writing on them can only be vaguely identified: it's the word 'Guardian'.

Zhao Yunlan suddenly remembers something that he's been neglecting. He pats the black cat standing on his shoulder and asks quietly, "What does 'Guardian' mean, exactly?"

"Guard the souls of the living, pacify the hearts of the dead, pardon the crimes of those who are trapped, turn the wheel for those who are reincarnating." After that bout of literary meowing, Da Qing reverts to plain cat speak, looking at him contemptuously. "Isn't that written on the back of the Guardian Order Token? Are you blind?"

Zhao Yunlan, who rarely knows less than Da Qing, just murmurs, "But why is the token left by Lord Kunlun called 'Guardian'?"

And what did Shennong mean when he talked about life and death?

Wondering about all this, he enters the big pagoda tree. Going downwards from the trunk, the road leads all the way into the Underworld.

The Road to the Underworld is hard for souls to navigate, but two of them aren't human, and the third is carrying the Guardian Order Token. They have certain advantages. There's the murmuring sound of flowing water on both sides, and it's cold enough to turn drops of water into ice. The three don't even dare breathe for fear of angering the resentful souls passing by.

The passers-by's eyes are all dull, and they're driven by ghosts, just like sheep being driven by a sheepdog.

Zhao Yunlan has walked this road before in the line of duty, but he was nervous every time. He walked very fast and didn't look left or right. But this time, he has many questions, so he pays attention.

There's only one narrow Road to the Underworld, and it resembles the legendary pathway to Heaven. Underfoot are hard cyan flagstones. Water is flowing on both sides of the road, bubbles rising to the surface, as if something might emerge from it at any time. On

both sides of the road, there are two rows of small oil lamps like street lamps, ten feet apart. They shine brightly and throw long shadows. Below each are a couple of legendary flowers belonging to the garlic family, blooming with tiny red blossoms.

Zhao Yunlan studies this carefully for a while and realises that these endlessly duplicated street lamps are in fact the Lantern of the Guardian. Long ago, he read some notes which said that the Lantern of the Guardian guides souls on the Road to the Underworld. The length of the Road to the Underworld depends on the number of things in your life that cannot be forgotten. Once the Lantern light has cleansed your soul, you finally reach the bridge which spans the River of Forgetfulness. After you drink a concoction made by the goddess Meng Po, you're ready to cross the bridge and reincarnate.<sup>159</sup>

All previous lives are as nothing. The light, though it doesn't scorch, can bring forth clean new souls.

On impulse, Zhao Yunlan bends down and inspects one of the copies of the Lantern closely. He finds its base engraved with these words: 'True Death Begets New Life'.

The full meaning of reincarnation.

Suddenly, he feels dizzy, and a raw pain pierces his heart, as if it were being torn from his chest. He stumbles, and Zhu Hong steps up to catch him.

She asks in a very low voice, "What happened?"

Zhao Yunlan's face is deathly pale. He swallows down bile and clutches the left side of his chest silently. After a moment, he shakes his head as if nothing had happened, and walks on.

Once they reach the Ghost City, Zhao Yunlan pulls talismans out of his wallet and hands them out. They each hold one in their mouth,

thus concealing the smell of their living souls from the ghosts.

In addition to immortals and souls waiting in line for reincarnation, there are also souls who are deeply obsessed and unable to reincarnate, as well as guilty souls imprisoned there. They've lived in the Ghost City for hundreds or thousands of years, and their obsession with returning to earth is beyond the understanding of the living.

When Zhao Yunlan was a teenager, he once came here to recover a living soul that had strayed into the Ghost City, but he didn't succeed. Instead, he had to watch the living soul being swarmed by the ghosts in the city and sucked up alive. Later, a whole company of city ghosts was needed to suppress the resulting riots.

At that time, Zhao Yunlan was still young and this scene has seemingly left a traumatic impression on him. Any human who can say "Why rejoice in life, why fear death?" must have forgotten the taste of death.

Dead souls thirst for the essence of the living with the desperation of a drowning man thirsting for air – instinctively and uncontrollably.

This is generally true, but so much more for the ghosts born in the darkness of the Underworld.

This is the reason why Zhao Yunlan's heart aches for Shen Wei. Sometimes, in his opinion, Shen Wei is harsh with himself to the point of abuse, disregarding his own nature.

Zhu Hong has never been to the Ghost City and glances at Zhao Yunlan uneasily.

Zhao Yunlan tells her quietly, "No matter what happens, don't spit out the talisman in your mouth, or we'll be in a lot of trouble. Too many ants can kill an elephant, and these feral ghosts are trickier than you'd think."



Zhu Hong nods.

Zhao Yunlan glances at her, hesitates for a moment, and says, "Or you could wait for me outside."

Zhu Hong shakes her head firmly. She doesn't know what use she can be here, but she feels more at ease if she can keep him in her sights, no matter where he's going.

The black cat jumps off Zhao Yunlan's shoulder and takes the lead on the road. Black cats and dogs are things of great yin energy and great evil. When ghosts meet one, they'll instinctively retreat<sup>160</sup>. So having a black cat is a little like having a police escort to clear the road ahead. This way, the two people enter the Ghost City without any problems.

On the 15th day of every month, the Ghost City market is held. It's not that day, however, and the city's market place seems a bit desolate.

In a short street, a grandma is squatting on the street corner with a small basket under her feet, her yellow eyes busily following the younger ghosts that occasionally pass by. At first glance, it looks like an ordinary scene of a poor, pitiful person having come out to do small business in the evening. Zhu Hong feels for her and can't help but look at her longer. But when the woman notices her, she immediately smiles and bares her yellow teeth. "Buy longevity, buy longevity."

The voice is hoarse and shrill like a small piece of iron scraping on bone. Zhu Hong gets goose bumps all over her body, and readily lets Zhao Yunlan drag her away.

"Don't look," he whispers. "That old lady has a bad reputation. She sells white wares."

Zhu Hong asks, "What are white wares?"

"Eating her cakes may extend your life, but it's not natural life. You also live longer when you suffer in bed as a vegetable. Get it?" Zhao Yunlan wraps his coat tighter, turns up his collar, and lowers his voice. "Just walk on and don't look around. This is an unregulated zone. If you look at them too long, they can force you to buy, which would be troublesome."

Zhu Hong immediately starts walking forward, no longer daring to let her gaze wander left or right. They walk the length of the winding street market until their eyes fall upon a little cottage in the very centre of it. It has a paper sign on the front door, with a single word written on it in black ink: 'Enter'.

The cottage is extremely dilapidated, but exactly like the small shop next to the big pagoda tree in Antique Street, there are two white lanterns with the word 'Guardian' hanging next to its entrance.

"Eight out of ten, they're selling such things." The black cat turns his head. "Their family is reincarnated every sixty years, swapping between the yin and yang dimensions. In the yang topside, they guard the entrance to the Road to the Underworld at the big pagoda tree, and in the yin down here, they guard the grocery store in the Ghost City."

Taking the lead, Zhao Yunlan walks forward, raises his hand, and pushes at the door. With a squeak, the battered door opens. Before, Zhao Yunlan has pulled a small mirror out of his wallet, which he now puts on top of the door. Then he steps inside.

At once, a little girl's voice comes from inside, saying crisply, "'The mirror lights the road, ghosts must stay out.' Does your honour have urgent business? "

With a nod at the door, Zhao Yunlan indicates to Zhu Hong to close it. The curtain of the inner room opens and a little girl emerges, her

hair in two braids.

The little girl doesn't come up to an adult's waist. Her face looks white and creepy, the colour of papier-maché. On her cheeks two blood red spots stand out, painted with cinnabar. Her beady black eyes are devoid of life, her lips are crimson, and she's wearing an old-fashioned padded cotton jacket. Her face is expressionless.

Nobody would find her cute. Rather, that face with a child's voice is terrifying.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't beat around the bush. Without a word, he takes out the *Record of Ancient Secrets*. He sticks the Guardian Order Token on it and squats down, eyes level with the little girl: "I'd like to ask you something; I humbly request your help."

The little girl's eyes fall on the Guardian Order Token, and her voice turns dazed. "So it's the Lord Guardian who's gracing us with his presence. How is my brother?"

"Oh, no need for formalities. Your brother is doing well. Just a few days ago, I sent him a few pounds of bacon as a New Year present," Zhao Yunlan replies politely. "I'd just like to ask you: this book, was it sold by your shop?"

The little girl reaches for it. Across the palm-wide distance, he can feel the chill emanating from her body, creeping along the pages. Where she touches it, a layer of frost forms on the paper. She flips the book open and nods: "Yes, it's from here."

She turns to the last page. There's a grey stamp in an unremarkable spot in the corner. Looking carefully, one can barely make out the word "miscellaneous". The little girl points to it. "This is the private stamp of our store."

"Can you find out who bought this book and brought it to the world of humans?"

He takes a pile of paper money out of his bag and lights it in front of the little girl.

The little girl rolls her eyes and smiles stiffly. "The Lord is polite. Please wait a moment, and come in for a cup of tea."

The two people and the cat follow her into the shabby store. The little girl serves them tea, and Zhao Yunlan holds it up to his face and smells it. He pretends to taste it, but of course, he doesn't dare drink it. Living souls mustn't consume things from the Underworld. This is a very old rule, and everyone with a little common sense knows it.

The little girl picks up a huge account book from the back of the desk and turns it over page by page. After a while, she announces, "I found it."

She raises her head and smiles at Zhao Yunlan: "I forgot to ask your Lordship's name."

"My name is Zhao," Zhao Yunlan says, frowning with an ominous premonition, "Zhao Yunlan."

"That's right." The little girl pushes the huge account book in front of him.

He looks at it, and the purchase record clearly states: Zhao Yunlan, the Lord Guardian, July 15, Year of Renwu<sup>161</sup>.

## Chapter 84

Zhao Yunlan is stunned, but he keeps himself from blurting out that it's impossible. After a moment, he asks, "What year is the year of Renwu?"

"2002," the cat calculates, using his claws. "What were you doing then?"

"I was doing a lot of underground work for the Guardian Order," Zhao Yunlan reminisces for a moment, "but it interfered with my studies too much. I almost dropped out of university to be a ghostbuster for hire, but my father stopped me. That year, I suggested forming the SIU. My father agreed and with his influence helped me set it up."

He frowns. "Speaking of which, was that my father or..."

He trails off. At Da Qing's confused look, Zhao Yunlan pats his head. "I'll tell you about it when we're back."

Zhao Yunlan turns to the little girl and asks with deliberate care, "I have one more question: how do you verify the buyer's identity? This wasn't written by the customer himself, right?"

The little girl raises her head with a mysterious smile. A seven or eight year-old girl that has the same expression as the Child Grandma from Tianshan<sup>162</sup> might seem funny, and under other circumstances one might wonder how she pulls it off, but in the Ghost City, it's barely weird.

She says, "Of course my accounts are well-organised. The name of the buyer and his identity matches his record in the Book of Life and Death. Do you doubt the validity of my information, Lord Guardian?"

Zhao Yunlan inclines his head and, without another word, picks up the book and walks to the door. Just when he's about to step outside, he turns back on a sudden thought. "What did 'I' look like when 'I' came to buy the book eleven years ago, do you remember?"

The little girl's crimson lips turn up. "I didn't initially remember, but now you mention it, you do seem familiar. If you hadn't just told me so, I wouldn't have thought that over ten years had passed."

She's indicating that the 'Zhao Yunlan' who came to buy the book looked just like the current one.

Zhao Yunlan lowers his head and ponders her words for a moment, then looks back up at her and says, "Thank you very much."

With that, he leaves briskly, Zhu Hong following in a hurry. The little girl gently calls after him from behind the old counter. Her voice no longer sounds like a child's, but much lower and indescribably miserable. "I might be too forward, but I must warn you, Lord Guardian: the omens point towards lethal danger for you one of these days. You'd better be extremely careful."

Zhao Yunlan shows no reaction. Zhu Hong asks quickly, "What? What lethal danger?"

The little girl stares at them, her eyes black and unnatural, and her smile stiff and silent. Zhu Hong makes to ask again, but Zhao Yunlan pulls her away with a nod to the little girl.

"But..."

"She's helping us because I sent bacon to her brother for New Year. How much do you think a few pounds of bacon can get us?" Zhao Yunlan quickly walks out into the store's courtyard. He shoots Zhu Hong a warning glance and lowers his voice to a warning whisper, "Even if she dares to say more, I dare not listen. The Ghost City has no morality or politeness, sometimes not even logic or reason. You

can't expect the dead to act like the living; why do you think they're confined to the Underworld? Remember, it's never good to owe the dead a favour."

Zhu Hong is quiet for a moment, then asks, "Why are you suddenly telling me this?"

"I have only a small number of female subordinates; they're like an endangered species. The men are hardass idiots in need of a beating. They run errands and deal with all kinds of monsters. Of course, I'm reluctant to make you do that." Zhao Yunlan smiles softly. "But I miscalculated; I didn't expect you to leave one day. If I'd known... Remember, don't think too highly of yourself. Even if you cultivate to the level of Nüwa, under my command, you can only ever be an administrator, and when you return to your tribe, you won't be able to deal with those grizzled snake geezers<sup>163</sup>."

Zhu Hong's nose and eyes are reddening.

"Shhh, keep the talisman in your mouth, and save your tears for when our department gives you a big send-off. This is no place for crying." Suddenly Zhao Yunlan stops and pulls Zhu Hong behind him. Someone has appeared on the cyan slabs at the grocery store's gate.

He, she, or it is squatting on the ground. Its arms reach past its knees, making it look like a hairless baboon. Its fingers are very long, forty or fifty centimetres. It doesn't have long hair, its neck is the length of two adult palms, and with its head down, it can touch its chin to its chest.

It looks at Zhao Yunlan and its mouth cracks open in a smile wide enough to reach its ears. It stands and stretches its neck, and its whole head turns 180 degrees. But on the back of its head is another face, straight out of a horror story! Long ghost fangs bared, it rushes them.

Zhao Yunlan already has his gun out and his finger on the trigger, but before he can shoot, the two-faced creature stops mid-jump and tumbles to the ground. It must be very practical to have a head with two different faces. It twists its head back around, so the smiling face is turned towards them again, showing two bright yellow gap teeth.

Shaking its head at Zhao Yunlan, its long neck swaying, it suddenly starts laughing. It's rocking back and forth, sounding like a duck laying eggs, as if Zhao Yunlan has suddenly become a comedian. 164

Zhao Yunlan doesn't want trouble in this place. He keeps his gun pointed at the creature, directs Zhu Hong to the side, and starts to walk away.

When the two-faced ghost sees they're about to leave, it hisses: "Men and ghosts walk different paths, men and ghosts walk different paths..."

This sentence stabs Zhao Yunlan straight in the heart, and his face darkens. He turns abruptly to stare at the ghost. His smile cold and his voice frosty, he says, "I conduct myself with respect here, and I don't want to be on bad terms with the Underworld, but you're shamelessly insulting me."

The two-faced creature tilts its head, its smile fading slowly, until it's just giving Zhao Yunlan a strange look. Zhu Hong pulls gently at his jacket. "Let's go, Chief Zhao."

Zhao Yunlan's hand is clenched tightly around the gun, but as he's about to take a step, the two-faced ghost speaks again: "Humans or ghosts, you have to choose one. The human way or the ghost way, you have to choose one. The human world or the Underworld, you have to choose one."

Its voice gets louder and louder, until it's ear-piercing. The five words "you have to choose one" come like wave after wave, spreading



through the cold streets of Ghost City, echoing from all sides, ringing in the ears like a never-ending torrent.

Countless phantoms and ghosts emerge from broken bricks and rotten roofs, from stone cracks and from underground. Their eyes flash with a strange light as they peer around, searching and whispering.

Zhao Yunlan, holding Zhu Hong, is worried, but he firmly suppresses his discomfort. As he's about to leave with her, the head of the two-faced ghost suddenly turns around with a groaning noise, the ferocious fanged side in front again.

In a voice harsh like an owl's cry, it exclaims, "There are living souls here! There are living souls here!"

Its words are like pouring water into boiling oil. There's a huge uproar of ghosts hissing and screeching. Zhao Yunlan shoots without hesitation, his special bullet ripping through the creature's skull and igniting its skin. In a flash, all that's left above the creature's shoulders is a pile of ashes.

But lots of feral ghosts have already gathered, their expressions primitive but greedy. They're like ravenous wild dogs, eager for yang energy. Even the black cat, fur standing on end, can't stop them. Sanity is in seriously short supply.

Zhao Yunlan curses and shoots the closest ghost, making its head burst into flame. It dissipates with a hysterical scream. But that has no deterring effect whatsoever. The swarming ghosts don't even look at their disintegrated<sup>165</sup> companion. Fear and reason no longer exist for them, and the previously empty ghost street is already overcrowded. More and more ghosts are appearing from all sorts of bizarre places, packed densely enough to cause claustrophobia.

Zhao Yunlan has only come to investigate, he didn't prepare for a fight, so he soon runs out of bullets.

Zhu Hong transforms into a giant python, swallowing four or five ghosts with one snap of her jaw. But it's not enough; more of them start clinging to her, some even climbing up and biting into her hard scales. She shakes her body to throw them off. Her tail is as thick as a grown man's waist, and she sends the ghosts flying one after another. Those who dared bite her, she swats out of the air and squashes into pulp.

But there are too many – just like the saying goes: it's easy to hide from the Lords of the Underworld, but not from their host of ghosts.

They're like leeches in a jungle, every single one out for blood and life energy, eager to suck them dry.

Half a dozen of them are still tangled with Zhu Hong. Whenever she throws one off, it simply pounces her again. One of them even steps onto her chest, close to where her heart is, and mercilessly rips out one of her scales with its long fingernails.

Then a fierce dagger descends on the ghost clutching the scale and cuts its skull in half.

Absurdly, even as it's rapidly dissipating on the wind, the ghost still tries to stretch its neck and lick the fresh wound.

Zhao Yunlan, wielder of the dagger, almost loses his cool. "Do they ever think of anything besides stuffing their faces?"

He catches the tip of Zhu Hong's tail and tugs on it. "Shrink, quick!"

Zhao Yunlan keeps swinging his dagger in true Fruit Ninja fashion even while he's talking, chopping the heads off a line of ghosts that have dared come near. Then he pulls back, and even in this crisis he somehow manages to find two seconds to take off his jacket and

hold it tight to his chest. It's quite the 'Heads may be breaking and blood may be flowing, but don't you get a drop of oil on my clothes!' gesture.

Unfortunately, when Zhu Hong thinks of why it's so precious to him, she can't find it funny.

Following Zhao Yunlan's suggestion, she turns into a tiny snake as thin as a finger, slithers into Zhao Yunlan's sleeve and coils around his wrist. Zhao Yunlan stoops to pick up Da Qing, now little more than a wretched black fur ball. He throws out a wind talisman, and reluctantly lights the little that's left of the Samadhi Fire in his lighter.

The astral wind and the blazing fireball react with each other immediately, sweeping out like a fire dragon, and the entire Ghost City starts to perform a screaming banshee act <sup>166</sup>.

Zhao Yunlan rubs the back of his hand, where the fierce ghost has left three bloody scratches. "That lethal danger didn't have to come to pass this quickly, did it? Was the girl messing with me?"

But he doesn't dare delay, so he shields himself from the roaring fire and runs for the exit.

They run all the way to the city gates, only to find that they've been closed. Zhao Yunlan whips around. The crazed and starving ghosts have even started swallowing up the samadhi fire, rising up into the sky like wingless birds. They float higher, buoyed by their huge bellies, until they explode. Even that doesn't make the other ghosts lose their appetite.

They're like moths to the flame, rushing towards the inferno in wave after wave. Against all odds, their relentless assault eats away at the fire dragon.

Da Qing screams, "Meow! Meow!" with his sharp claws unconsciously pulling at Zhao Yunlan's hair. "What the fuck do we do

now?"

Zhao Yunlan says blandly, "Break through, what else?"

With that, he takes out his mobile phone and takes several snaps of the monstrous ghosts rushing towards them. Then he calmly pulls out the Guardian whip and puts the mobile back into his pocket. "I'll use that as my new profile pic."

Da Qing screams, "Are you crazy?! You're still in the mood to take photos at a time like this? Are you going to do a group photo with them to prove you were here and keep it as a souvenir, you jerk?"

"What are you shouting about?" Zhao Yunlan impatiently pushes the wailing cat's head away from his ear. "This is nothing. My wife's run away and I haven't even complained about it."

Da Qing is speechless. He has no idea what happened, but clearly Shen Wei has upset Zhao Yunlan badly.

This is when Da Qing takes a look at Zhao Yunlan's relaxed expression and realizes that this might be this idiotic human's way of destressing, like going bungee jumping after getting his heart broken. Is Zhao Yunlan treating this like some kind of extreme sport to let off steam? Da Qing has known him long enough not to put it past him.

The samadhi fire is burning out, and the last remnants of the fire dragon vanish. With ghosts besieging them like in a scene from a zombie movie, the Guardian whip cracks through the air, splitting the dead silence of the Ghost City for the first time in thousands of years.

Zhao Yunlan feels some unknown power flooding his whip hand. At first, it's jerky, but he quickly becomes familiar with it... as if it has always been part of him, as if something is waking up fast.

Suddenly a human-sized hole is punched into the city gate behind them. A man swathed in all black steps through with his head held high. He touches a steadying hand to Zhao Yunlan's arm, making the whip roll up all the way from the tip to the grip and wrap around his arm, where Zhu Hong catches it in her jaws.

A long blade appears in his hands, and he swings it over half of the Ghost City. The city shakes to its foundations, sending out a droning hum, and countless regretful ghosts perish under his blade.

Then the man grabs Zhao Yunlan around the waist and drags him through the hole in the gate, leaving that hellhole of a city behind.

Once in safety, Zhu Hong drops to the ground and transforms back into a human. She cries in happy surprise, "Ghost Slayer, Your Honour!"

Her formidable saviour, His Honour the Ghost Slayer, only says, "Why are you here?"

Zhao Yunlan's strangely calm expression finally gives. Tired to the point of exhaustion, he lets Da Qing drop to the ground, walks over without any formality and embraces the feared and admired Ghost Slayer. Quietly, he says, "Come back home with me."

Poor Zhu Hong has just changed back into a human, still a bit shaky on her feet. Witnessing this scene, she drops to the ground in shock.

...Being chased by millions of hungry ghosts isn't such a big deal after all.

## Chapter 85

Zhu Hong points at the Ghost Slayer, trembling. "He... he's..."

"Shen Wei," Da Qing says with a strange sense of superiority. He looks sideways at Zhu Hong, who's still on the ground, and licks his paws, faking calm, giving her time to adjust her world view.

Shen Wei's hood has fallen to his shoulders, revealing Professor Shen's gentle and elegant face, somehow completely out of place in this situation. After a moment, he gently pushes Zhao Yunlan off him, and frowns as he takes the hand scratched by the feral ghost in his own. His fingers on Zhao Yunlan's wrist tighten momentarily, then he loosens his grip and makes a clawing gesture. A thin black line appears on the wound and dissipates into the air in a second. The mutilated hand heals rapidly.

"Get out of here," Shen Wei says succinctly.

Just then, a crowd of ghost messengers hurries towards them, followed by a panting judge. Each one of the Ten Kings is lazier than the next, but they never forget to act high and mighty. The thankless job of running errands and working hard all falls to the old judge.

Panting, he orders his ghostly crew to repair the gate and suppress the feral ghosts. Beside him, a sweating secretary nervously checks the scene, trying to tally how many ghosts have fallen to the Soul Slashing Blade.

Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan simply ignore them and walk away together. Zhu Hong and Da Qing scramble to keep up with them amidst the chaos. The judge is wiping his brow as he yells: "My Lord! Sir! Wait!"

Shen Wei doesn't answer, only looks at him over his shoulder and raises an eyebrow, otherwise expressionless.

"Here in Ghost City... no matter whether they've sinned or are waiting for reincarnation, we keep a count of them all. My Lord, you... this..."

"What?" Shen Wei asks mildly. "I can't kill them?"

The judge dares not reply.

Shen Wei tilts his head with a gentle and polite smile, folds his hands into his dark sleeves, and says in a tone bordering on humility:

"Esteemed judge, although my origins are lowly and I lack talent, to this day I have never heard of anything the Soul Slashing Blade cannot cut through or kill. If this causes trouble or inconvenience in any form, I am truly sorry."

... It's like he's apologising in good faith!

Seeing his smile, the judge shivers all over. He swallows hard, moistening dry lips. After a long moment, he forces himself to smile. "Yes... of course."

Shen Wei studies him with a hint of a smile, then drags Zhao Yunlan off.

Zhao Yunlan stops in his tracks. Suddenly Shen Wei's smile seems a little unfamiliar to him; he's never seen him be so overbearing. He looks back to the judge standing there wiping cold sweat off his face, and asks, "Was the attack by the two-faced creature that blocked us premeditated? By the Underworld? What would they gain from that?"

Shen Wei drops the smile and lowers his head in silence. Why? Those clowns are just trying to give people a taste of what evil ghosts are like, to remind them that the ghost tribe is far worse than this, and make them watch their step.

"Shen Wei!" Zhao Yunlan grabs him. "Don't act dumb. I asked you to come back with me, so talk to me!"

"You should go," Shen Wei says quietly when they reach the pagoda tree beside the Road to the Underworld. His voice has lost the hostility and cold indifference he used with the judge; it's low and tired, sounding helpless. "When the living stay in the Underworld for too long, it's bad for their health. If you delay any longer, you'll get sick."

Zhao Yunlan lets go of him and stands stock still, staring at Shen Wei's back. Shen Wei doesn't even turn his head.

After an endless silence, Zhao Yunlan says quietly, "Getting sick won't kill me. Just come back with me."

Shen Wei doesn't move.

Zhao Yunlan clenches his teeth. "I'd fucking love to handcuff you and lock you in my apartment."

Shen Wei, keeping his back to him, suddenly smiles, as if he's heard the most intimate and beautiful words of love. Even the gloom in his eyes softens and melts away.

"If I come with you, will you take the medicine?" he asks.

"No fucking way!"

Shen Wei turns around and looks at Zhao Yunlan. After a while, he sighs. "I'm of the ghost tribe, Yunlan. No matter what Lord Kunlun gave me, no matter what you turned me into all those years ago... those are all hollow, fake titles that I do not deserve. In essence, I'm a ghost. Ghosts are deemed unlucky from birth. Since primordial times, there have been tales that if someone so much as saw a



ghost, they would meet a bad end and not even have a final resting place in death."

Zhao Yunlan looks at him and tries his hardest to swallow down his burning exasperation. He takes a deep breath and speaks slowly, thoughtfully. "I don't believe that. No matter what, come back with me first, and then we can solve the other problems one at a time. Even if we can't be together, at least be where I can see you every day, so I can stop worrying."

"Where you can see me," Shen Wei repeats softly, the corners of his mouth twitching gently. But the smile turns out to be a wry one. After a while, he says softly, "Yunlan, please stop torturing me."<sup>4</sup>

"Looking back," he says in a strangled voice, "my biggest regret is that I carelessly provoked you, and then failed to control myself, making one mistake after another. Come to think of it, maybe it's because my cultivation isn't high enough, my mind not strong enough, and my heart too weak."

Zhao Yunlan realises what's about to happen and lunges forward – but his outstretched hand grasps only empty air; Shen Wei has already backed away, leaving only a black afterimage behind.

Zhao Yunlan can only watch as he disappears before his eyes, and Shen Wei's voice sounds more and more distant: "I can only take you this far. You must leave!"

The word 'leave!' echoes over and over, assaulting their eardrums like an ominous curse.

Zhu Hong thinks she sees tears in Zhao Yunlan's eyes just then, but he quickly suppresses them until his eyes are merely bloodshot.

"You go back." A moment later, Zhao Yunlan stares in the direction Shen Wei has left in and says calmly, "Take Da Qing with you – oh

and you say you want to leave, do you have a specific time? Let me know in advance, and let Wang Zheng help arrange it... "

Zhu Hong cuts him off. "Chief Zhao, what's going on?"

Zhao Yunlan waves a hand, not wanting to say more. "Nothing. Just go."

"Go where? I'm not going anywhere! " Zhu Hong's voice rises. "He... Shen... the Ghost Slayer... arrrgh! Whoever he is, I couldn't care less! Why did he say that just now? Why did he say you can't be together? What medicine does he try to make you take? Why... "

Da Qing jumps onto Zhu Hong's feet, crouches there and looks up at Zhao Yunlan. "Since ancient times, it has been said that 'Men and ghosts walk different paths'. Even as old as I am, I've never seen people who are true opposites like yin and yang who are so desperate to be together. But water runs downhill. If they're together, the ghost will absorb the life energy of the living person. It's probably a law of nature. It's easy for living people to lose their life energy, but not easy to get it back. The other party has to voluntarily offer up a part of their body that can touch their soul. The Ghost King should naturally stand shoulder to shoulder with a Sage, so he probably doesn't need a golden core<sup>167</sup> like the shifter tribes have. So the only thing left for him to give would be... blood from his heart?"

Zhao Yunlan is extroverted, but he's also shrewd and reserved. No matter how sad or happy he is, if he doesn't want people to know, it won't show on his face.

Zhu Hong feels her breath catch in her throat, but when she turns to look at him, he's expressionless and calm, unmoving and unspeaking, pale as snow but without a trace of weakness or sadness. He reminds her of one of the sky pillars that survived the Cataclysm, standing strong and indestructible.

At first Zhu Hong is speechless, but her heart is biased and has Zhao Yunlan in it. All his emotions — happiness, anger, sorrow and joy — affect her deeply. Zhao Yunlan hasn't even done anything yet, but the more she thinks about it, the more she gets choked up with frustration until finally, she can't bear it any more and bursts out, "He's ensnaring you!"

Zhao Yunlan finally looks at her, frowning slightly. "What did you say?"

"He's ensnaring you!" Zhu Hong says angrily. "If he hadn't given you hints from the start, would you have run after him? If he wasn't leading you on and playing hard to get, would you fall into his trap? It's not like you have anyone to bail you out. What do you think you could do, force him? The ghost Slayer is all-powerful, do you think you'd be able to force him into anything if he wasn't willing?"

Da Qing rolls off her feet, amazed that her world view has miraculously self-healed in record time. Her resilience is mind-boggling; he's never seen anything like it. She doesn't seem to remember she's talking about the Ghost Slayer. To think that once upon a time, she was even afraid to open the letters he sent from the Underworld!

The more Zhu Hong says, the angrier she gets, and the more her heart hurts for him. She just can't let it go. "He's deliberately seducing you, deliberately pretending to reject you, deliberately making you pursue him and leave you hanging. If he can't be with you, why didn't he say sooner? He clearly forced you, forced you..."

Zhao Yunlan gets the last cigarette out of the pack from his pocket, lights it with a click, and calmly blows a ring of white smoke. He asks lightly, "Forced me to do what?"

For a moment, Zhu Hong is tongue-tied, but then she bursts out, suddenly inspired, "Forced you to stay at his side, forced you to go to extreme lengths for him, forced you to have eyes only for him and

everyone else can go hang. I think he had bad intentions from the start."

Zhao Yunlan laughs softly, pats her shoulder and prods her towards the big pagoda tree: "All right, if you're done nagging, just go."

Zhu Hong stomps her foot. "Are you even listening to me?"

Zhao Yunlan drops his smile, drops his gaze, and flicks the ashes: "Silly girl, you shouldn't be talking, your emotional intelligence is way too low. Don't you know to mind your own business? He's mine, so if there are problems between us, it's our own business, no matter who's wrong. When outsiders scold him in front of me it's like a slap in the face. I'm too lazy to make it into a big deal, but if this was anyone else, he'd have blown up at you ages ago. So stop talking nonsense, go back and have a good night's sleep. You've worked hard these two days; I'll give you overtime pay."

Zhu Hong's voice trembles: "I'm an outsider?"

"Obviously." Zhao Yunlan gives her a sideways look. "Three's a crowd."

"You asshole!"

Zhao Yunlan spreads his hands helplessly. "How am I an asshole?"

Finally, that old clichéd line bursts out of her: "How on earth can I not compare with him in your eyes?"

Watching the whole thing with his paws over his face, Da Qing finds to his surprise that he actually enjoys this kind of generic melodrama, though it really crimps his style.

Zhao Yunlan has to sigh. "You're gentle, kind, pure and beautiful. You're a girl. You're better than him in every way."

"Then why won't I do?"

Zhao Yunlan thinks for a moment, then smiles softly, revealing two small dimples. "Probably because I'm short-sighted – but there you're not much better. You see, I'm a 21st century smoker and alcoholic; I'm useless, foul-mouthed, and bad-tempered. I can barely pretend to be gentle and caring for three days in a row. I'm a wastrel and a mess, and I keep getting myself into trouble. Even my mother can't stand me and I was kicked out of the house when I was young. You're a big beauty, don't you deserve better?"

Zhu Hong gazes at him with tears in her eyes: "Stop acting all considerate!"

"Really, you have no idea." Zhao Yunlan slowly enjoys the last of his cigarette. "You don't even know... I don't even bother to wash my socks. I buy seven or eight pairs and cycle through them. After I've worn them all, I pick them up and shake them and arrange them by how much they smell. Then I'll wear them again. Then I randomly stuff them into laundry bags and end up losing them one by one. Until Shen Wei moved in, I never had a complete pair of socks."

As he speaks, a smile tugs at his lips, making him look tender.

"Sometimes even I can't figure out how he puts up with me, so you probably have no idea how good he is to me. If in the future you want to go back to your tribe, you can, and if you want to come back one day, I'll welcome you with open arms. But let's just say we won't mention this matter again, okay? There are better men than me all over, they're basically growing on trees. Are you saying you're too stupid to find someone?"

He extinguishes his cigarette and from his height advantage, ruffles Zhu Hong's hair with some force. "I'm just an undisciplined fucking queer. What kind of future would you have if you were with me? Come, goddess, just call me an asshole if it'll make you feel better. Just say you don't like me, say you're done with me, okay?"

Zhu Hong can't hold her tears back any longer, they're streaming down her cheeks. She chokes out, "A 'fucking queer', huh. Only a ghost would fancy you; only a ghost would want you."

Zhao Yunlan thinks about it and realises that her angry words are actually quite reasonable – it even sounds a bit like she's giving him and Shen Wei her blessing. He laughs. "That's right, only a ghost would fancy me."

With that, he pokes Da Qing's stomach with his foot. "You two go back together. Be careful on the way."

Without looking back, Zhao Yunlan walks onto the bridge across the River of Forgetfulness and jumps right over the railing and nimbly lands on a ferry boat, startling the faceless ferry ghost. Zhao Yunlan pats his shoulder. "Hey, brother, can you tell me how to get to the Profane Lands?"

The ferryboat ghost's face is as pale as a whiteboard, as if he were the one who's seeing a ghost. So without saying a single word, he jumps straight off the boat and dives into the river. He sinks without a trace, not even leaving bubbles.

Zhao Yunlan sees that just a few words from him scared even a ghost into diving. He rubs his nose and sits on the boat to think.

"Far beneath the Underworld... beneath the Underworld..." Zhao Yunlan stares at the calm River of Forgetfulness below his feet, folds Shen Wei's coat neatly and places it on the ferry.

A little ghost pops out of the river to try and touch it. Zhao Yunlan says, without even turning his head, "How dare you touch the Ghost Slayer's clothes?"

Terrified, the ghost plunges back into the water and disappears.

Zhao Yunlan rolls up his sleeves and trouser legs and jumps straight into the River of Forgetfulness. A woman and a cat scream in the distance, and the splash also scares away a bunch of underwater ghosts.

The water is chilling him to the bone; it's freezing cold, like everything else in the Underworld. Zhao Yunlan's watch gives off a soft glow in the water. He looks down, planning to dive as far as he can before coming back up for breath. Unexpectedly, the water dragon pearl hanging on his neck glows white and solidifies into a huge bubble which envelops him. Zhao Yunlan carefully exhales, and is pleasantly surprised to find that he can breathe again.

"Fucking awesome!" Safely holding the water dragon pearl, which according to legend can resist fire and water, he relaxes and confidently dives deeper.

He can't tell how long he's been diving, but the faint halo of light around the boat has disappeared. Above and below there are only dark waters. His watch is nothing but a flashlight now – it shines but the dials aren't moving. It's like time has stopped completely.

The ghosts around him have also gradually disappeared. After a while, even the water seems to have become stagnant.

There's no light, no sound, no nothing. Zhao Yunlan finds his own heartbeat disturbingly loud; covering his ears doesn't make it better. It's like the beat of a drum, and the more he pays attention to it, the more intense it gets.

Some time later, even the glow of his watch fades, and now there's nothing around him but black. He can't tell how long he's been sinking into darkness. He almost feels that it's not his surroundings that have become dark, but that he's gone blind again.





## Chapter 86

Chu Shuzhi didn't expect the first person he'd bump into upon returning to Dragon City would be Guo Changcheng.

He has just been freed from his shackles, and he has taken back what the Underworld confiscated from him, and was thus in a good mood. He took advantage of the New Year holidays, found himself a wild mass burial mound and went into seclusion there for several days. But when Wang Zheng sent him an email about Zhu Hong planning to resign, he quickly booked a train ticket back to Dragon City.

The railway station is crowded and bustling with life. He's walking by himself, looking around trying to find a taxi, when he sees Guo Changcheng's familiar figure. The young man is carrying a huge woven nylon bag, almost bent into a full stoop, struggling along slowly.

One look at Guo Changcheng is enough to know that he has never worked out. Even in school, his performance in sports was mediocre. He's carrying his big bag like a snail carries its heavy shell. Passers-by can't help but stare at him.

Chu Shuzhi has to stop and look twice, just to be sure he's not mistaking him for someone else. He glances at the bag made of nylon, normally a very strong fabric, and notices there's a rip starting to appear in it. A woman selling boiled corn by the roadside kindly points out, "Hey, boy, your bag is about to rip open!"

Guo Changcheng makes a sound in response and turns his head, but his bag is too bulky and heavy, and he fails to see where he's stepping. His foot catches on the wheel of a girl's trolley case,

confusing him even more. Before he can apologise, the young man next to the girl gives him a shove. "Look where you're going!"

Guo Changcheng has already been unsteady on his feet; now he collapses, hitting the ground with a clang. The bottom of the bag comes apart and lots of strange things come tumbling out: pots and pans, bowls and dishes, and small plastic bags filled with food and clothing. The weirdest thing is a large wooden chopping board, about 60 cm in diameter and 8 cm thick. It's like he's been carrying around half a WalMart.

The man who pushed him is probably in a hurry to get out of the crowded train station. He's irritated and frowning in disgust. Seeing Guo Changcheng dressed in drab old clothes, he takes him for a migrant worker returning to the city, and feels immensely superior. Pulling the girl away by her hand, he complains sharply: "Can't you see there are lots of people here? Are you crazy to bring such big luggage? Can you afford the compensation if you damage someone else's suitcase?"

Guo Changcheng apologises over and over. He sees that his things have fallen to the ground, and squats down quickly to pick them up with numb hands. He looks at the nylon bag spilling objects from both ends and tears his hair in despair.

Just then, a wiry hand reaches over, deftly pulls the two ends of the torn bag together, and knots them into a pocket shape. Dropping the sundries into the bag like they weigh nothing<sup>168</sup>, it goes on to pick up the broken things that have scattered across the ground.

Guo Changcheng calls out, "Chu-ge!"

If he had a tail, it'd be wagging so hard he could be taken for an electric fan. Suddenly, he forgets that the one standing in front of him is the king of zombies. In Guo Changcheng's eyes, Chu Shuzhi is a great saviour sent by heaven.

Chu Shuzhi ignores him; nylon bag in hand, he turns to the young man, who hasn't gone far. With an ugly expression, he says, "You over there, you'd better come back and apologise at once."

Chu Shuzhi's face normally looks quite ordinary, but when he scowls, he can be very frightening, with zombie ferocity. The young man who was so incensed just now looks at him and starts to feel faint-hearted. "What do you want?"

As Chu Shuzhi is about to walk towards him, Guo Changcheng holds him back. "Chu-ge, let's go. I didn't see them just now, I'm sorry."

He looks up and smiles at him, holding his ice-cold hand. "It was my fault, my fault."

The two people leave, loudly swearing and cursing, not realising the danger they've just escaped.

Chu Shuzhi looks at Guo Changcheng, concluding that he's not just kind to the point of saintliness, but that there must be something wrong with his brain. He has no temper and is so without spirit, rather than saying he's not like an energetic young man, you could say he's not even like a person.

Chu Shuzhi shakes his hand off angrily and points at the bag in his hand: "Is your family so poor that you have to sell groceries and kitchenware over the New Year?"

"No, I was taking it to someone, but suddenly the bag broke." Guo Changcheng follows him, embarrassed, "I... I... let me carry it. It's not far."

Chu Shuzhi avoids his paws impatiently and frowns. "Lead the way."

Guo Changcheng dares not say any more and timidly runs in front as instructed.

They walk down the street in front of the station, then along a number of small lanes taking them to one of the shadier districts of the bustling city. They arrive at a dilapidated bungalow where a student, her hair in a ponytail, is sweeping the floor near the front door. When she sees Guo Changcheng, she greets him cheerfully, a college holiday volunteer badge dangling from her neck.

Seeing the girl, Guo Changcheng is a little embarrassed and ducks his head. In a barely audible voice<sup>169</sup>, he says, "Hello."

The girl sees the big bag in Chu Shuzhi's hand, and immediately drops her broom to help him open the door. As they walk, she asks Guo Changcheng, "Have you got the registrations? Got the printouts? We need to thank people online."

Guo Changcheng is a slow, not very smart worker. At the SIU, Zhao Yunlan often gets frustrated and scolds him. But when he's done, his work is always very careful and meticulous. No matter how long and unnecessarily detailed his reports are, and how much paper he's wasting on them, there's never a single mistake. Eventually, even their nit-picking leader can't complain.

Guo Changcheng nods quickly and pulls some sheets of printed paper out of his pocket, half a dozen pages at least. They record in detail who donated what, the donor's contact address, telephone number, e-mail address etc. The donations not only include different amounts of money, but also a head of cabbage, and numerous other oddities.

It turns out that this is a volunteer action led by several of Dragon City's colleges and universities, jointly sponsored by some social service organisations during the winter vacation. It's called "Honour All Elders and All Children"<sup>170</sup>. Guo Changcheng is focusing on the city's poorest seniors, who for various reasons are unable to provide

for themselves. Each volunteer group is responsible for taking care of a fixed number of elderly people over the long term.

Because Guo Changcheng is bad at communicating, he can't take on the task of relieving the boredom of the elderly, or go around soliciting donations. Fortunately, there are many girls in his volunteer group, so he does as much physical work as he can, and over the holidays, he's been helping with transport and deliveries.

Chu Shuzhi helps them drop off the things, then starts Guo Changcheng's car to take him to No. 4 Bright Street. Guo Changcheng's palm is rubbed raw from carrying the nylon bag, so he sits in the passenger seat, sullenly dabbing at it with a wet paper towel.

For once, Chu Shuzhi is in the mood to talk to him. "Why do you care so much about other people? Do you want to save everyone?"  
<sup>171</sup>„

Guo Changcheng stares at him blankly.

Chu Shuzhi changes the question: "Does your family know what you're doing?"

Guo Changcheng shakes his head in silence.

Chu Shuzhi gives him a puzzled smile. "So did you make a wish at the temple on New Year's? The way you're going, you'll surely get all your wishes granted."  
<sup>172</sup>„

Guo Changcheng shakes his head again. He couldn't be happier with his own life right now, and genuinely doesn't have anything to ask for, except for the safety and health of all his family and friends—and his family and friends indeed all seem to be safe and healthy at the moment. He thinks it best not to trouble the gods.

At a red light, Chu Shuzhi takes the opportunity to properly look at him. Guo Changcheng isn't tall, strong, or handsome. His face can't be called good-looking. He usually keeps a low profile and doesn't even wear brands popular among other young people. He's the type who won't stand out in a crowd, and due to his lack of self-confidence, he can't be said to have class, either.

However, as he's sitting there quietly, his calm expression shows some kind of unspoken, natural Zen.

Guo Changcheng is an ordinary person and not a monk. He eats meat and drinks wine, he doesn't understand spiritual practice and can't even recognize all the words in the Scriptures. Of the world's Bodhisattvas and Arhats, he knows only the two from the popular TV series "Journey to the West": Guanyin of Mercy and the Buddha himself. Due to a problem with the performers, he's not even sure of their genders<sup>173</sup>.

But Chu Shuzhi can feel that, all by himself, undeterred by the world around him, he's quietly cultivating *something*.

It's neither the happiness of this life nor the merit of the next life.

For all that Chu Shuzhi's a cultivator and highly perceptive, he only has a hazy feeling about what it could be.

Although he doesn't understand why Guo Changcheng does these things, it makes him feel uncomfortable, and just a bit angry and unsettled at the unfairness of it.

If nobody else, shouldn't a guy who's practically swimming in virtue have a peaceful and happy life? How could he have been born unlucky, destined to die young? Although everybody knows that trying to figure out how merits and demerits are counted in the Book of Life and Death is ridiculous, does the Underworld have to be so blatant about it?

But he doesn't say anything, and his fanboy Guo Changcheng doesn't have the courage to start another topic, either. They don't speak anymore all the way to No. 4 Bright Road.

Night has already fallen, and both humans and ghosts are present.

When Chu Shuzhi enters the SIU, the first thing he sees is a bunch of vacant-eyed ghosts and spirits. The whole group looks as if they've been struck by lightning.

Before he can ask what's up, Wang Zheng turns to him and asks tremulously, "Chu-ge, did you know that Professor Shen—Shen Wei—is actually the Ghost Slayer?"

Chu Shuzhi is dumbfounded. After a while he says calmly, "Oh, that idiot Zhao Yunlan, is there anything he won't do? And where the hell is he? He's had his fun and now he's run off?"

Da Qing says meowfully, "He's jumped into the River of Forgetfulness."

Chu Shuzhi boggles. "...Lovesick? Suicidal?"

After the initial panic, Da Qing and Zhu Hong have largely calmed down. Zhu Hong knows that Zhao Yunlan carries the Water Dragon Pearl, and no place with water can hurt him now. She should have realised that as soon as she hung the pearl around his neck. Zhu Hong thinks if she'd just been a bit more suspicious, she would've guessed that her Fourth Uncle had known something ahead of time.

She says, "I guess he's gone to find the Ghost Slayer."

Chu Shuzhi looks around. Except for Lin Jing, who's still in the field but has agreed to take the midnight bus back, the staff of No. 4 Bright Road is basically here. He puts his hands in his pockets and leans against the office door. "I say let's tell each other what we

know. It's been a mess lately. Let's focus on consolidating the information and figure out what to—"

He suddenly breaks off, paling. The others get nervous, wondering what's on his mind. "What is it, Chu-ge?"

"Wait, Shen Wei is the Ghost Slayer?" His face is green now, and after a long time he mumbles, "What the fuck, I'm off, I've taken liberties with him so many times!"

...So sometimes those who stay calm just take a little longer to process things.

~~~

Zhao Yunlan has long lost track of time and space. He feels as if he were locked up in a small, dark room. Diving into the River of Forgetfulness feels very different from jumping into the Holy Tree.

The unfathomable darkness closes in on him, pressing heavily on his temples. Gradually, he feels weaker and weaker, as if his blood sugar were dropping, and nausea settles in his stomach. The further down he goes, the worse it gets.

He doesn't dare move his head, feeling that he'll pass out if he shakes it just a little. His heart seems to be trying to jump out of his chest, and the sound of blood rushing through his veins is so loud in his ears that it's becoming unbearable.

Just then, he sees a little light.

It's weaker than a firefly, but a torment to his eyes now used to the darkness. He shields them with his hand, but he can't help but be drawn to the glimmer of light.

It's a huge ancient tree, with branches going farther than the eye can see, its diameter almost a hundred metres. But it's a dead tree, not a

single leaf on the withered and twisted branches. When he touches its rough bark with his hand, it feels uneven, different, ever-changing in a way that's hard to describe.

Zhao Yunlan is shocked. Is this the Ancient Tree of Virtue?

He descends another thousand metres, until he finally sees the roots of the ancient tree. His feet find solid ground after drifting for so long. Walking around the Ancient Tree of Virtue, he finds a plain stone marker on one side. By the glimmering light of the ancient tree, he can see what's engraved on it.

He's never seen those characters before, but he recognizes them nonetheless: "Heaven and Earth, Ghost City, Profane Lands."

"Nüwa..." Somehow, without knowing why, Zhao Yunlan calls out the name.

His voice flows through the water, rippling outward, trembling like a sigh, stirring up a violent surge of evil energy in the depths of the darkness. Zhao Yunlan ignores it, and on a whim¹⁷⁴, reaches out to touch the edge of the stone marker with his fingertips. White light rushes into his brain, roaring, and for a moment he can't see anything; his eyes penetrate space and time and his gaze lands on a woman with a snake's tail.

She's beautiful, with long hair falling all the way to the ground, and he feels like he has known her all his life, like a mother or an older sister.

The voice of the strangely familiar woman sounds in his ear. "Kunlun, what if Shennong was wrong? What if we were all wrong?"

Shennong was wrong? What was he wrong about?

The voice says, "But we cannot turn back."

Wait!

Nüwa seems to have tears in her eyes. She looks at him with infinite fondness and opens her arms for him. Zhao Yunlan reaches out, but before he can touch her, Nüwa's image starts flickering and breaks apart into a thousand shards of light in front of him, leaving behind only emptiness.

Zhao Yunlan's mouth falls open in protest, but he fails to make a sound.

Time shifts.

Dazzled, Zhao Yunlan lands in some ancient time, and for a moment he can't tell whether he's Lord Kunlun or the mortal from five thousand years later, completely overwhelmed by the churning chaos of time and space.

He feels himself sitting on the Great Seal, guarding its pitch black entrance, while lounging against the great stone marker. With nothing else to do, he stares dazedly at the Tree of Virtue all day every day.

Then, at some point, a handsome and strange youth starts appearing at his side. He's like a little tail, constantly around him.

Lord Kunlun ignores him at first, but finally he cracks. "We're already in your territory, what do you want with me?"

The youth says, his expression open, "I like you."

Lord Kunlun has always been called rude and ill-mannered. Finally he sees the chance to call someone else rude. He seizes the opportunity and, without sounding even a little bit like he wants to scold him, says, "Rude."

The Little Ghost King looks at him, bewildered. He has no idea how he's supposed to have been rude.

Lord Kunlun has been guarding the Seal for many years and is bored out of his mind, so he asks again, "What do you like about me?"

Like a blank slate, the Little Ghost King's face reflects all of his desires as he says frankly, "You're good-looking. I want to hug you."

Lord Kunlun sneaks a glance at this bold Little Ghost King. He's not offended, but rather intrigued. He teases, "You're not wooing me at all, I can't respect you!"

The Little Ghost King doesn't understand why he's not being respected, but he feels that what Lord Kunlun said makes sense, and so he bows his head in shame.

Lord Kunlun beckons him. "Come here, I'll teach you uncivilised little thing some morals."

Chapter 87

At the beginning of the flood, the great sage Shennong himself came down to Earth. Becoming a healer, he collected and tried out hundreds of herbs to save people's lives.¹⁷⁵ He taught his findings to the people, and during that time, Lord Kunlun joined the crowd and listened to him lecturing several times.

Now Kunlun repeats Shennong's teachings to the Little Ghost King. Anything he doesn't remember, he simply makes up. For him, it's only a way to pass the time, but the Little Ghost King, who knows nothing, doesn't dare miss a word and regards every bit of nonsense as a golden rule.

Gradually, in that desolate place by the Seal, they come to depend on each other.

The Little Ghost King is still infatuated with Lord Kunlun, but he knows the meaning of shame. Listening to Kunlun's words, he realises that repeating his own blunt words from before isn't good enough, so he doesn't try speaking anymore. Instead he's looking for other ways to please him every day.

Unfortunately, his choices are limited. The Profane Lands don't have many distractions, just miles and miles of barren land. It's considered a normal pastime to catch two feral ghost creatures and to watch them tear into each other until one of them finally eats the other.

But the Little Ghost King doesn't like that, and it follows that Lord Kunlun is even less likely to enjoy it.

So the Little Ghost King finally comes up with the idea to gather the fangs of thirty-six demon beasts. To him, they symbolise the magnificent thirty-six mountains and rivers of the Kunlun mountain

range. Weaving a cord from his long hair, he works them into a necklace so unique it can't fail to impress.

He gives the necklace to Lord Kunlun, but when he receives his gift of thirty-six big teeth, Lord Kunlun's expression turns very strange, even more unusual than the necklace itself. He looks like he might have a toothache, but he seems to be suppressing that feeling, forcing out a smile and thanking him with gritted teeth.

The Little Ghost King comes to the conclusion that he probably doesn't like it. Lord Kunlun never wears it, not even once. And every time the Little Ghost King mentions it, Lord Kunlun changes the topic.

But no matter how much he wracks his brain, he can't come up with anything else. One day, sitting on a big root of the Tree of Virtue, he remembers the fleeting glimpses he got of the outside world and blurts out, "There's a kind of flower that looks like a little bell, and it can have many different colours. I smelled it, it has a very light fragrance."

Lord Kunlun tilts his head at him. "And?"

The guileless Little Ghost King's face is full of longing. "It's really beautiful. If I make a necklace from it, will you like it?"

After a moment, Lord Kunlun asks with a forced smile, "So all this time you've tried to win my approval because you want to leave this place?"

The Little Ghost King stares blankly, then quickly shakes his head.

Lord Kunlun deliberately teases him. "Then what for? I'm here to guard this place so none of you can leave. Not even a single one."

What for...? The Little Ghost King determinedly stares at Lord Kunlun's teasing face. He wants to say something, but doesn't know

what. His thoughts and emotions swirling, he can't find a way to express himself.

He feels that honest confessions would be too crude, yet crudeness isn't suited to express his feelings.

He remains unable to speak. His mounting frustration makes him look quite belligerent, and his claws emerge unbidden from his fingers.

Lore has it that all beings born into this world suffer because they're subject to fate. But most suffering comes from thinking too much and reading too little. Nowadays, there are books left behind by sages. But those sages themselves were born into chaos and had no books; nobody could answer their questions. They could only stumble along their path full of doubts and anxiety. In all likelihood, they suffered greatly, and when it came to expressing their innermost thoughts to those they loved, they couldn't even manage to find the right words.

Finally Lord Kunlun laughs out loud, gently lifts the youth's chin, and kisses his beautiful forehead. Then he flies up into the branches.

His vicious energy instantly gone, the Little Ghost King sits stock still for a long while, blushing to the tips of his ears. He stands up without any sense of what he's doing, swaying as if drunk. Then his legs give out and he falls right off the root of the Tree of Virtue.

The youth was born into the ghost tribe, and although he has grown up to be a misfit, he was surrounded by the ghost tribe every single day of his life. So the only thing he ever saw was sex-driven lust of the lower ghosts. He has never known what a kiss is, but now that he has experienced one, he feels like his whole body is wrapped in warm air, gently floating in it.

Even the River of Forgetfulness can't make him float so freely.

All of a sudden, the young ghost turns and runs into the Great Seal, which cannot restrain him. Plunging into the Profane Lands, he disappears for decades.

When he appears in front of Lord Kunlun again, he seems to have grown up a little. He's taller now, almost as tall as Lord Kunlun. The soft lines of youth have firmed, but his face is still as beautiful as ever.

He's gingerly cradling a sphere of golden fire in his hands, which he offers to Lord Kunlun.

"This is...?"

"This is the soul fire from your left shoulder. It was scattered all over the Great Seal. It took me fifty years to collect all the pieces." The Ghost King gently cups the warm flame and snuggles it against his cheek, before handing it reluctantly to Lord Kunlun. "I'm returning it to you."

The smile fades from Kunlun's lips. He studies the Ghost King for a while, and finally asks, "And what do you want from me?"

"That..." The Ghost King stalls, unable to say it. Finally he shyly points at his own forehead. "That... Can you do it again?"

Lord Kunlun stares at him for a long time, making him nervous. Suddenly, he reaches out and touches his chin, and then he very tenderly kisses the Little Ghost King's lips. He folds his hand around the Ghost King's, enveloping the ever-shining soul fire more tightly in the youth's slender fingers.

Lord Kunlun seems absent-minded and deep in thought. After a while, he sighs and says quietly, "I'm rich in mountains and rivers of the world, but it's just a pile of damp rocks and wild rivers, nothing special. Out of all I have, the only thing worth anything is probably my sincere heart. You want it? Take it."

It's like a world is opening up before the Ghost King's eyes, and he suddenly realises what it is that he's been desiring for so long but has been unable to say. Just those two words, 'sincere heart', have captured him, never to let him go again.

Ghosts aren't living beings, but for a moment, he thinks he can hear his heart beating.

"And this, too," Lord Kunlun pats the back of his hand. "If you like, you can keep it. My body has formed the Lantern of the Guardian, and my heart's blood its wick. Only my spirit is left, but it's enough to guard the Seal. There's no point to me getting it back. Do you still have that tendon I gave you last time? "

The young man nods quickly.

"Take it out and let me see," Kunlun says faintly.

The Ghost King peels away some of the disorderly layers of his primitive clothes and takes out the tendon from deep inside.

"I'm the sacred Kunlun mountain range given form, and before that, I can be traced back to Pangu's divine axe." He lightly strokes his hand across the tendon pulled from his own body, as if he has already forgotten the agonising pain of it, and says matter-of-factly, "My bones and tendons are linked to the earth vein of Kunlun and the sky pillars. Strumming it can make the Heavens and Earth move¹⁷⁶ ."

He makes a complicated gesture with his fingers, and the tendon turns into a golden ray of light sliding straight along his fingers into the Ghost King's forehead. For a moment, the young man feels like he can hear the world transforming, a hundred thousand mountains rumbling and roaring.

Suddenly he's elevated to indescribable heights, able to clearly see every single mountain and every river rushing along in vast, ceaseless currents.

Lord Kunlun's voice speaks from within, neither loud nor strong, but suffusing him, "From now on, the hundred thousand mountains will obey you. Although you'll hardly be able to leave your ghost tribe origins behind, I guess you're half a god now. In the future, you can travel freely between the Three Realms. I'm no longer in charge of you."

The Little Ghost King interrupts him. "I'm not leaving!"

After a while, he hesitatingly adds, "You're here. I don't want to go anywhere."

"I can't stay long," Lord Kunlun says, turning his head to gaze at the River of Forgetfulness, its waters stretching endlessly into the distance. "I'm just a primordial god. I cannot leave, but I was never meant to stay forever, either. I suddenly feel that my day is coming."

Panicked, the Little Ghost King asks, "What day? Where will you go?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Kunlun says calmly. "I'm going to die."

"No way. How can a god die?"

"Gods die, too. Aren't Pangu, Fuxi, Nüwa and Shennong all dead?" Lord Kunlun says. "Now it's my turn."

Hearing this, the Little Ghost King stares blankly for a second, and then suddenly turns ferocious. "If the Great Seal didn't exist, if you hadn't helped Nüwa seal the four pillars, if you hadn't turned your body into the Lantern of the Guardian, you wouldn't have to die, right? Then I'm chopping down this tree and piercing the goddamn Seal!"

Sometimes, the Little Ghost King is like a fluffy little wolf-cub, like a puppy, with matching habits. If you pet the fur on his head, he'll roll on the ground and show his belly. However, he'll always have fangs, and if you're not careful, he'll bare them and rip out your throat.

Lord Kunlun has long gotten used to this, and is unconcerned. He pats his head, murmuring, "Not to die... to live forever... Little one, a stone is immortal, too, but it's just a stone, you know? Shennong said that unless we die and disappear, we aren't gods. I always thought he was talking nonsense, but now I'm starting to understand a little bit."

The Ghost King slaps his hand away, unwilling to know what Kunlun understood. "Don't you dare!"

Lord Kunlun holds up his hand, which suddenly appears transparent. The angry Little Ghost King is taken aback and grabs the hand at once, turning it over and over, as if to make sure Kunlun is still there. He stubbornly repeats, "So what if I cut down the Tree of Virtue?"

Lord Kunlun smiles. "You've inherited my mountain god powers. You can even cut down the Holy Tree in the Forbidden Place. What is the Tree of Virtue compared to that?"

The Ghost King tries again. "Then I can also pierce the Seal and destroy that woman's goddamn rock?"

Lord Kunlun laughs bitterly. "Yes. But I'd probably die faster."

"I can also..." The Ghost King hesitates, but then goes on with ferocity, "I can also kill everyone in the whole world! I can slaughter all living things, stop the mountains from turning green, the waters from flowing, leave the ground full of corpses and no human alive for thousands of miles!"

Lord Kunlun lifts an eyebrow in surprise. "Oh, so powerful?"

The Ghost King squeezes his hand. "You can't die. I can do anything; I *will* do anything!"

"Shennong was right about that, too." Lord Kunlun turns serious and looks at him coldly. "We should've put you to death much earlier, that would've been the only way to prevent all of this suffering."

The Little Ghost King stares at him stubbornly, lips pursed.

Lord Kunlun suddenly smiles, as warm as the first thaw after winter, the tender buds of spring coming alive in bubbling brooks and flowing rivers all around. "From the moment Shennong borrowed my shoulder's soul fire... no, from the war between gods and ghosts, Nüwa's creation of man, even Pangu's cleaving of the world, this has been destined. I'm destined to die here and now. Even if you close the world down again, you'll only make me die for no good reason. It won't stop anything."

"You don't understand," the beautiful mountain god says in a gentle, patient tone he rarely uses. "What they call fate isn't some fantastical way of all roads leading to the same destination, nor is there anything that secretly binds you. In fact, you have uncountable choices at any given time. You can do to Heaven or to Earth. But you'll only ever choose one particular path. I didn't understand these things when I was young, either. When you've grown a little, you'll probably understand them too."

The Little Ghost King finally finds himself lost for words. For the first time, he realises how powerless he is. All he can do is kill, slay, devour. He really could slay everything in the world, living beings and dead things. He could shatter the earth and make ghosts cower in fear. But what use would that be?

He still can't save the person he loves most.

Lord Kunlun watches the Little Ghost King's angry frown get deeper — he still hasn't learned to control his emotions¹⁷⁷ and hold them within his heart. He stares ahead blankly for a while, then suddenly wails and bursts into tears.

Lord Kunlun looks at him with almost tender affection, thinking with regret that he won't be able to see the little beauty grow into a great beauty.

In the blink of an eye, it's five thousand years later. Times of difficulty and hardship have come and gone; the place is still the same, but people have changed.

Zhao Yunlan jolts back from the Seal as if electrocuted. He senses there's someone behind him, and that someone chuckles. He draws the Guardian whip before even turning around. He takes two steps back towards the Seal, bracing his back against the stone marker, and finds himself opposite the Ghost Face, ten steps away.

The Ghost Face measures him with a tilted head, and a smile appears on his fake face. "I heard that contains all of Nüwa's memories. What did you see?"

Zhao Yunlan huffs a bitter laugh, still a little off-balance. He says viciously, "Why would I tell you?"

The Ghost Face approaches unhurriedly and, following Zhao Yunlan's example, reaches out to touch the stone marker. "Five thousand years ago, he and I were clearly twin Ghost Kings, but then he went and endeared himself to the oh-so great Lord Kunlun. Five thousand years later, one of us is inside, one is outside; one is the prisoner, one the jailer.

The corners of his smile turn down as he turns his head towards Zhao Yunlan. He lowers his voice and says, savouring every word, "But the Great Seal is about to break, and then I'll be able to walk in

and out freely, and finally everything will die. Lord Kunlun, if my stupid brother had not suddenly made his move and preserved your spirit, stuck you back into the wheel of reincarnation and turned you into a mortal, you would've long since vanished like all the other ancient gods. Is Shennong stupid? Unnatural things¹⁷⁸ cannot last long in this world; after a while they'll simply die."

He reaches out and touches Zhao Yunlan's cheek with icy fingers, suddenly heaving a moaning sigh. "But death itself was ignited by your soul fire, and has turned us into... creatures that are neither alive nor dead. Didn't it all go wrong?"

Zhao Yunlan frowns and looks away. He's heard several versions of the soul fire story by now, and has no idea which one is true.

So he asks, "Didn't Shennong borrow my soul fire? Then why did it appear in the Profane Lands? And how would death have been 'ignited' by it?"

The Ghost Face is stunned, his mask going blank for a moment, as if he doesn't understand what Zhao Yunlan is asking. Then he throws back his head and laughs. "Hahaha, and here I thought he was so pure and innocent, always acting the saint, when really..."

He stops abruptly because the Ghost Slayer's blade is splitting the air, strong enough to cleave his whole person in two. The Ghost Face quickly retreats, and the remaining momentum of the blade forces Zhao Yunlan to step back.

"Shen Wei?"

Shen Wei lifts his hand to catch him. "You must be crazy to come to this kind of place alone!"

But before he can touch him, the Ghost Face is suddenly there and grabs Shen Wei's arm, turning it into black smoke and slamming it into Zhao Yunlan to stop him using the whip.

With a burst of laughter, the Ghost Face transforms his whole body into a huge cloud of black smoke which envelops Zhao Yunlan head to foot.

But then his laughter stops abruptly. The black smoke coalesces again into the Ghost Face, but there's nobody else there.

The Ghost Face murmurs in stunned surprise, "Who took him away?"

Chapter 88

Meanwhile, Zhao Yunlan feels like someone has put a sack over his head. When it finally comes off, he finds that he must have teleported.

The darkness flashes into light behind his eyes, and when he opens them, he finds himself in a place he doesn't recognize. At least it's not the bottom of the River of Forgetfulness anymore. He cracks his whip twitchily and looks around. Suddenly, in the whiteness vast enough to cause snow blindness, he sees the back of a lonely figure in the far distance, walking away from him.

With his long legs, Zhao Yunlan catches up quickly. He now sees that the figure is a small old man.

Even if the man stood up straight, he would probably barely reach Zhao Yunlan's chest. His back is bent like a cooked shrimp and he's carrying a large basket commonly used by people from Yunnan. When Zhao Yunlan cranes his head to peek inside, he finds it completely empty, yet the old man stoops like he's carrying a few hundred pounds, weighing him down so much he can't even lift his head. He can only face the ground with his back to the sky and struggle to walk forwards.

Zhao Yunlan reaches out to help support the big basket. "Is it that heavy?"

The old man finally stops walking and wipes off the sweat that's dripping down his forehead. When he lifts his head, he reveals a weathered and tanned face, looking like the old man holding a bowl of water in the famous oil painting "Father".¹⁷⁹ He smiles tiredly at Zhao Yunlan. "Come. Come with me."

"Wait." Zhao Yunlan frowns. "Where are we? Who are you?"

The old man doesn't reply, just lowers his head again and keeps walking forward like an old ox pulling a plough. His shoulders slump under the weight of the empty basket, and a pair of shrivelled and protruding collarbones show at his neckline.

"Is it you who brought me here? Hey, what are you doing? I finally managed to catch up with my wife and didn't even get a chance to say a word before you so rudely interrupted."¹⁸⁰

The old man listens to his complaints with a faint smile, neither explaining nor answering.

"Where are you taking me?" Zhao Yunlan pursues. "What are you carrying?"

The old man suddenly starts crooning a phrase to the beat of his own footsteps: "Guard the souls of the living, pacify the hearts of the dead, pardon the crimes of those who are trapped, turn the wheel for those who are reincarnating..."

He drones on, reciting the words one by one. Just those four phrases, over and over, and the low rolling sound together with the mystical words is reminiscent of traditional funerals, where flag-bearers scattered paper money while they walked, repeating the sentence "this family grants 120 yuan" as they followed the coffin.

Zhao Yunlan sees he won't get an answer from this man and stops asking. The whip in his hand turns into the black paper with red letters that is the Guardian Order Token, and he rolls it into the shape of a cigarette and sticks it in his mouth to lessen his craving. Listening to the old man's voice, he silently thinks things through.

He suddenly gets the impression that he must be walking on the pathway to Heaven.

Wait... that pathway to Heaven... Isn't that on Mount Buzhou?
Hasn't Mount Buzhou already collapsed?

At that thought, Zhao Yunlan abruptly stops walking. From out of nowhere, a sighing sound can be heard. As if he's suddenly reminded of something, he stares at the old man closely and blurts out, "Could you be Shennong?"

The old man's footsteps come to a stop again. He turns his head slowly and looks at him wordlessly.

Zhao Yunlan's muscles tighten immediately.

Ever since he determined that the so-called 'memories' in the Holy Tree were fake, he's had a creeping suspicion. Mount Kunlun isn't a mountain just anyone can climb, let alone tamper with the tree. The number of people able to alter those memories can be counted on one hand. Zhao Yunlan has thought about those memories many times. The part about what happened to the soul fire on his left shoulder is very vague, and the part about the collapse of Mount Buzhou feels off, too.

So who's lying to him?

Shennong seems to fit the bill best. In the memory, Shennong displays a proper and indifferent attitude from beginning to end. At first glance, he seems to be very righteous, but when you think about it carefully, that's not entirely true.

The memory is a complete story. If any one of the people who appear in it were to be removed, the ending would be different. In other words, their every word and movement has both causes and consequences – with the exception of Shennong. Even if Shennong weren't in the story, the beginning and ending of the story would be the same, nothing would be affected.

Later, he has met Shennong's medicine bowl, which resides in his father's body, and the Ghost Face has slipped up and mentioned that "Shennong borrowed your soul fire". All of this seems to corroborate his suspicions.

And then, inside the Great Seal, Nüwa's seemingly right but evidently false statement: "What if Shennong was wrong?" has set his senses tingling again.

Zhao Yunlan clenches his fist. "Are you the one who messed with the Holy Tree, or not?"

The old man doesn't answer, but he looks worried. For a moment, Zhao Yunlan thinks he can hear the winds of Buzhou blowing.

He stops speaking; the snow-white world suddenly falls apart under a bright piercing light. He quickly covers his eyes, only lowering his hand slowly and tentatively quite some time later. Through eyes blurred with tears from the glare, he sees he has returned to the human world.

Zhao Yunlan looks around and for a moment he's stunned. The place seems incredibly strange and familiar at the same time.

He finally figures out why when he sees the ice cream shop on the corner.

His eyes go wide – this place is near his home, but the ice cream store across the street has long gone bankrupt and turned into a hotpot restaurant five or six years ago.

For a while, he simply stands there, confused, but finally he walks over in long strides. He buys a bowl of shaved ice with what little change he has and then, standing like a fool in the middle of a group of young girls, he leans against a window and stares at the big "Year 2002" calendar hanging on the wall of the store, absently crunching away on his shaved ice.

He looks just like a mafioso come to collect protection money or else he'll smash up the store.

Zhao Yunlan feels like he's either in a dream or watching a badly edited movie: one scene takes place in the sky, the next underground. He's finally returned to the human world only to find himself landed eleven years earlier.

When he's halfway finished his shaved ice, he suddenly catches a glimpse of a man. He straightens up and cranes his neck like a meerkat to look out of the shop window. Several girls, captivated by the image of this 'fierce handsome man eating shaved ice', can't help following his gaze. Just like him, they crane their necks and look outside.

They end up looking like a basketball team of meerkats.

A familiar car comes out of the little neighbourhood where he used to live—the old car that carried countless memories of his childhood and which his dad ultimately mercilessly replaced!

At once, Zhao Yunlan drops his uneaten ice on a table and runs out so fast, it's as if he were trying to catch adulterers in the act. He flags down a taxi, pulls out his tattered ID, and flashes the badge at the driver. "I need you to follow that car!"

The taxi driver never thought he'd be able to pull a 007 in this lifetime and immediately gets excited. He floors it, and the car roars forward like a F1 racing car. The acceleration squashes Zhao Yunlan back into the seat.

Zhao Yunlan's dad drives all the way to Antique Street, and through it to the little lane full of shops, as far as it's possible to go by car. From around 100 metres away, Zhao Yunlan sees his dad park the car at the kerb and walk off, sporting the kind of big paparazzi-repelling sunglasses that celebrities wear.

“Driver, stop here, stop here!” Zhao Yunlan’s eyes are glued to his dad’s back. He hurriedly grabs his wallet but when he tries to pay, the taxi driver refuses to accept it.

“Hurry up and take it, don’t waste time...I’m going to lose track of this guy.”

The taxi driver salutes heroically and then gives Zhao Yunlan an enthusiastic handshake. With determination, he says, “Comrade, go. I won’t take your money. I want to serve the people!”

Zhao Yunlan is speechless.

But after a second, he decides to jettison politeness, jumps out of the car and starts running.

Antique Street isn’t as regulated yet as it will be eleven years later. The narrow lane is crammed with stalls selling everything from precious jade artefacts to antique paintings, real and fake – at any rate, the place is extremely busy, and as the road gets more and more narrow, it’s very easy to tail someone.

Zhao Yunlan dry-swallows a yellow concealment talisman that’s supposed to hide his energy and obscure his tracks. The talisman has been drawn by Chu Shuzhi, who’s so poor that all he has left is self-confidence; he thinks of himself as incredibly cool. He claims that with this talisman, you can even easily investigate love affairs between great ancient gods.

Zhao Yunlan thinks he’s full of bullshit, but right now, he can’t help but put his hopes in the talisman. Still he doesn’t dare follow too closely.

Thus he promptly loses his dad as soon as he turns the corner.

Zhao Yunlan carefully pokes his head through the door of each store but still can't spot him. When his eyes fall on the big pagoda tree connected to the Underworld, he knows that the person he's been following isn't his pompous father but the lowlife who dares use the body of a living person to go down to the Underworld.

Zhao Yunlan takes a deep breath. This'll be the second time in a day that he's going down there. He really wishes he could kick that broken bowl's ass.

Shen Wei's recommendation that he leave as quickly as possible made sense. It's definitely not a good thing for a living person to walk the Road to the Underworld. Even a bachelor like Zhao Yunlan, who'll think nothing of going barefoot in winter, can feel the bone-penetrating chill of that road.

Zhao Yunlan's 'father' waits around on the road for a bit, constantly rubbing his hands and frowning more and more. It seems he's waiting for someone.

The Road to the Underworld is just a narrow trail, and people and ghosts can easily be spotted on it. Zhao Yunlan doesn't dare reveal himself, so he's stuck crouching in the big pagoda tree, feeling trapped between the worlds of yin and yang.

Just as his limbs are starting to go numb, a familiar figure appears from the other end of the road. That man is very eye-catching; where he goes no ghost can stand in his path¹⁸¹. Even the boldest and calmest ghosts can't help but lower their heads and back away. The effect is one like Moses parting the Red Sea.

Seeing that, Zhao Yunlan doesn't know how to feel. Anyone finding out that his 'wife' and his future father-in-law already met eleven years ago would surely feel just as conflicted.

Shen Wei is wearing the long cloak of the Ghost Slayer, and his face isn't visible. He stops five paces from Zhao Yunlan's dad without uttering a word, the chill emanating from his body even more unbearable than the desolate Road to the Underworld.

Zhao Yunlan's dad has also stopped pacing and rubbing his hands. The two confront each other silently, the atmosphere oppressive.

After a while, Zhao Yunlan's dad says: "The evening paper Yunlan brought home carries Your Honour's scent."

Shen Wei doesn't even open his mouth to explain, he just chuckles coldly.

Zhao Yunlan has never heard such a cold laugh from Shen Wei before. For a second, he suspects that the person in the black cloak isn't Shen Wei at all but the enigmatic Ghost Face.

Although a powerful soul inhabits father Zhao, his body is still made of mortal flesh. He hasn't been on the Underworld road long, but his lips have already turned pale purple, and on closer inspection, he's even shivering slightly. However, his voice doesn't falter at all. "Don't forget what you promised when you insisted on sending Kunlun's soul into the reincarnation cycle all those years ago."

"Huh?" Shen Wei finally speaks slowly. "I only looked at him from very far away. When he approached, I hid. Immortal, even if you distrust my character and worry that I won't keep my word, don't tell me you also distrust the gilt-edged contract with Shennong?"

His tone sounds warm and polite as ever, but Zhao Yunlan is used to the nuances now and picks up matchless irreverence and unspeakable sarcasm from this short sentence.

Zhao Yunlan's father frowns. "But what's going on with the Great Seal? Why is the Houtu Great Seal failing?"

This time, Shen Wei is silent for a while before he says in a lower voice, “If you still remember, Immortal, Fuxi’s Great Seal was only a few hundred years old when the sky pillar toppled and it was destroyed, to be re-erected as the Houtu Seal. It has now lasted for who knows how many millennia after Nüwa’s fall. Constant dripping wears away a stone... the Great Seal is weakening irreversibly before our eyes. Even I cannot stop it.”

“Nüwa sacrificed herself to create the Houtu Great Seal and Kunlun poured his heart's blood into it, too. Of course I’m not implying you did something to it that you shouldn’t have, but if the Great Seal collapses completely, what do you plan to do?”

“Yes,” Shen Wei pauses before continuing lightly, “what do I plan to do? I am very slow-witted and only now finally coming to understand what the immortals meant by ‘no death, no extinction, no godhood.’ I clearly was not meant to be transformed, to become a God respected by the people. It’s simply not in my nature.”

“Don’t think that the contract with Shennong won’t bind you anymore when the Great Seal breaks. If my son—”

Father Zhao’s voice suddenly breaks off, like the audio track of a movie cutting out halfway through. His mouth is open, but no sound comes out.

Shen Wei’s face is hidden by black fog but Zhao Yunlan can sense he’s smiling.

He listens to him slowly say, “Son? Immortal, it seems you have immersed yourself in your role too deeply. If your esteemed son knew that you gave up your peaceful immortal existence to attach yourself to none other than his father’s body, do you think he would accept you?”

Father Zhao makes a croaking sound. He clasps his throat with both hands, eyes hot with anger, but he can’t say a single word.

Shen Wei regards him emotionlessly for a bit. Finally, he laughs lightly and waves his hand. Zhao Yunlan's dad staggers back as if punched. "You—"

Shen Wei folds his hands into his long sleeves and nods slightly: "So, Immortal, please be careful what you say. Some things everyone knows, but they are still better left unsaid, don't you think? The sage Shennong is a noble character of high prestige, of course I also highly respect him. But respect is just respect. If he were alive now, he and I would still be irreconcilable enemies. I still don't think much of the three sovereigns of the past. Immortal, you were originally Shennong's treasured bowl... but it looks like you haven't cultivated to his level of power yet?"

Father Zhao is shaking all over, but Shen Wei continues indifferently, "I don't want to humiliate you. I want to reason with you peacefully. Hopefully you can also conduct yourself well and not overreach yourself. If there is nothing else, I will be off."

When he's done speaking, he doesn't spare Zhao Yunlan's father a further glance, but turns and walks down to the River of Forgetfulness, further into the depths of the Underworld.

Having listened to all of this, Zhao Yunlan is stunned. Shen Wei and Shennong... how did they become irreconcilable?

No wonder Shennong's Bowl ran away that day before he could clearly say what he wanted to say. Shen Wei was there so he didn't dare say it!

How did his gentle, cultured, easily bullied lover become a commanding terrorist pushing his cheap dad around?

What's going on with Shennong's guilt-edged contract?

Right... if what happened in the stone marker next to the Great Seal is true, if Shennong was the one who borrowed the soulfire in his left shoulder, then how did the ghost tribe get a hold of the soulfire afterwards?

What happened in the middle?

If Shennong manipulated the memory within the Holy Tree, what was he trying to hide?

Seeing that his 'father' is about to come up, Zhao Yunlan hurriedly climbs up the pagoda tree and hides in its leafy branches. He only sticks out his head once Father Zhao is far away.

Then he goes back down to the Underworld and stares in the direction Shen Wei disappeared in. He keeps turning things over in his mind for a long time, but they still seem untrue. He's getting so used to being lied to, he's almost getting paranoid, suspecting that nothing is real at all.

Suddenly, in a flash of inspiration, he remembers the *Record of Ancient Secrets* he's still carrying. He quickly takes it out and sees that the book has become blank. The cover and the pages are empty – the writing has disappeared without a trace.

Zhao Yunlan's expression darkens. Eleven years ago—that is, 2002—that was also the aforementioned year of 'Renwu'.

If what he's seen today is true, then if he were to go to the store inside the Ghost City and buy the *Record of Ancient Secrets* again – would that book appear at No. 4 Bright Road eleven years later?

Chapter 89

So what would happen if he didn't buy that damn book then? What if he just threw this sheaf of blank paper directly into the River of Forgetfulness?

As he thinks it, so he does it, raising his hand and throwing the white book into the river. It makes a 'plonk' sound and a splash, then slowly sinks. He waits for a while, but nobody appears to fine him for littering.

He turns and walks back towards the pagoda tree.

He decides the first thing he'll do is buy a pack of cigarettes to clear his lungs, and then he'll book a room at a hotel, eat a good meal, and sleep. After that he'll once again go stalk Shen Wei and have him come up with an idea to send Zhao Yunlan back... suddenly he stops walking.

Can he be sure that the Shen Wei he just saw actually was Shen Wei?

Maybe that's why 'intelligence' and 'wisdom' are two completely different concepts. Throwing the book away was actually the right response – some things aren't supposed to be investigated, and when you're supposed to be confused you should stay confused.

However, from the moment he turned around, his thoughts started wheeling and now he can't stop them. Whenever he catches tiny pieces of information, he can't help but try to string them together, instinctively and without thinking about it.

Without him noticing, his pace slows. He thinks, if he really just leaves things behind here and returns to eleven years later...

If it's all fake, there should be no issue. He'd need to think about who created such an environment and made him hear those words he can't make heads or tails of.

But assuming the things that happened here were real, then if he doesn't buy the book back, the SIU eleven years later won't have the *Record of Ancient Secrets* and he'll be unable to find the secret stories allowing him to infer that Nüwa created people and then became the Houtu Great Seal, etc etc. And in order to stay safe, he might never go to Mount Kunlun. He won't know who has the Ink Brush of Virtue, and he won't go look inside the Holy Tree, and everything that follows won't happen.

In the same way, he might never even go down to the Underworld. Even if he came here by chance, he wouldn't know that his dad's body was taken over by Shennong's medicine bowl. He might go home to see his mother, not caring at all what his dad is doing. Of course he wouldn't secretly flag a taxi to follow him and wouldn't squat on the Road to the Underworld pondering the stupid question of whether he should buy a book—because that book wouldn't exist.

According to that bulbous-nosed ol' uncle Einstein's famous Grandfather Paradox¹⁸², none of this will happen unless he enters a parallel universe, in other words a completely different world.

Unless...

Zhao Yunlan stops and closes his eyes. All he can hear is the murmur of the River of Forgetfulness; the Underworld is as quiet as an empty abyss. Zhao Yunlan suddenly remembers what he heard in the Houtu Great Seal—the words that seemed to come out of his own mouth: “Fate means that, at any given time, you can do to Heaven or to Earth. But you'll only ever choose one particular path...”

His breathing gradually slows.

Of course, Zhao Yunlan knows his own mind. He's desperate to know whether Shen Wei and the medicine bowl inhabiting his dad's body really did go behind his back to meet and say those words eleven years ago; he wants to know if Shen Wei really had a contract with Shennong that he didn't know about, if he has a side to him that's completely different from the gentlemanly appearance that he puts on.

And does Shen Wei really not know that the Underworld has been using him all along? If he knows, how can he just not care? Or... could he have a plan already?

Half a minute later, Zhao Yunlan finally turns back quietly and strides towards Ghost City, a life-force-concealing talisman in his mouth.

The shop owner still looks like an eight-year-old girl. She doesn't seem surprised to see him. When he asks for the *Record of Ancient Secrets*, she merely tells him the price in paper money. Then she brings over the huge account book and makes him write down his name.

In a flash of white light, 'The Lord Guardian' and the current year appear behind the words 'Zhao Yunlan'.

This time, no one in Ghost City discovers that he's a living creature. Zhao Yunlan walks out without a hitch, the *Record of Ancient Secrets* in hand. He heads straight towards his own home, furtively hops over the wall, and climbs into his bedroom through the window.

Neither the Zhao Yunlan nor the Da Qing of eleven years ago are there. On the desk, there's only a computer and a pile of messy English finals review materials. Next to it, the draft comment 'bullshit' is written in an atrocious wild scribble.

Zhao Yunlan can't help but gently touch that vulgar word and laugh. He feels like he's looking through a mirror at his adolescent self.

Then he turns and gently lifts the board on his bed under which he used to hide all his sorcery books, the cinnabar, yellow talisman paper, and tools.

Zhao Yunlan easily finds the section meant for hiding books. To make the book less conspicuous, he uses the same method he used with all the other books: he pulls an expired calendar from a drawer, tears a page out of the middle, and wraps it around the cover of the *Record of Ancient Secrets*. On the blank cover he writes in small letters: 'Nüwa created people, repaired the sky...'

He originally meant to write 'Nüwa created people, repaired the sky, and then transformed her body into Houtu; Fuxi created the Great Seal using the Eight Trigrams; Shennong sacrificed himself to taste hundreds of herbs, Gonggong's mystical dragon struck Buzhou in anger' and other information that has been useful to his future self. Who would've thought he'd only manage to write a few words before a person's voice drifts in from the hallway corridor?

Zhao Yunlan hurriedly drops the book and puts down the board in a panic, almost getting his hand caught.

The ears of the person outside, however, are atypically sharp. There's a knock on the door and he hears the voice of his mom from eleven years ago: "Little scoundrel, where are you? Why are you making such a racket?"

Zhao Yunlan swallows but doesn't dare reply. The knocking just gets louder. "Zhao Yunlan?"

Zhao Yunlan has no choice but to pitch his voice high. "Meow—"

"It's the cat?" the woman outside mutters. "Doesn't it only come back after dark? Why is it home so early today? Maybe it's pregnant? I've been saying we should take it to get neutered."

Zhao Yunlan can't imagine how Mr Da Qing would react if he heard this.

Fortunately, he's been able to fool his mom. Just as he starts to relax and consider finishing his sentence on the book, he hears the sound of a car outside. He opens the curtains and cautiously peeks out – his split-personality family-ruiner of a dad has come home.

That's the final straw. Zhao Yunlan decides quickly and jumps out of the window again, landing soundlessly on the grass. He circles in the opposite direction of the oncoming car, successfully slinking away from his own home like a thief.

He goes through the little housing community and emerges into the main street, unsure what he should do next. Suddenly, Zhao Yunlan feels the ground shake violently. At first he thinks it's an earthquake, but when he looks around, all passers-by are still walking calmly. The houses by the roadside are still standing, safe and sound. Not even a speck of dust has fallen.

Zhao Yunlan realises that his world is the only one that has moved. Everything around him suddenly collapses and the ground underfoot disappears. When he lifts his head again, he finds he's back on that white road and the person in front of him is once again the man he suspects of being Shennong.

Zhao Yunlan strides over and grabs the old man by the collar: "Talk to me, is this—"

The old man finally opens his mouth and interrupts his question in a strange tone. "Do you know what 'death' is?"

Zhao Yunlan frowns deeply. He stares at the man for a few seconds, but when he can tell from his eyes that neither coercion nor deception will get any information out of him, he slowly releases him. He thinks for a while, then tries a straightforward answer. "Death is when the body's vital signs stop?"

The old man's voice is hoarse: "What about souls¹⁸³? What about the six realms of reincarnation¹⁸⁴?"

Zhao Yunlan quickly picks a different explanation: "Then death is the end of one life and the beginning of another."

The old man laughs and asks, "Then what about the ghost tribe? And the Profane Lands?"

Zhao Yunlan has no answer. After a while, he says, "You tell me, what is it?"

The old man's eyes suddenly burst with a bright light. For a moment, he even seems terrifying. He grabs Zhao Yunlan's arms, his grip tight enough to pass through flesh. "Have you forgotten? Kunlun, death is actually—"

Saying this, he seems like every dying extra on TV—sniffing for a long time without naming the killer, and as soon as they give a hint, they die—only this old man is split in two right in front of Zhao Yunlan's eyes.

From his head straight down to his feet, the Soul Slashing Blade's overwhelming force cuts the man cleanly in half like a watermelon. The cold blade goes on to penetrate the white ground, leaving a trench almost a metre deep. Everyone standing close can feel the ground trembling from the fierce blow.

Until now, the split man is still standing upright, fanatic expression forever fixed on his face.

For a moment, Zhao Yunlan is dazed. Then he steps back instinctively as before his eyes, blood spatters all over.

After a while, he slowly raises his head to see Shen Wei standing in front of him. He swallows hard but can't manage to say a word.

“Are you okay? Hurry, come with me.” Shen Wei reaches out his hand, but then he sees Zhao Yunlan’s pupils contracting violently. Looking down, he notices that his hands are covered in blood, as if he’s just slaughtered a pig. Uneasily, he lets go at once and wipes his hand on himself, but no matter how much he wipes, he still feels unclean. He’s deeply disgusted and feeling quite nauseated, and no longer wants to touch Zhao Yunlan. He self-consciously brings his hands back into his sleeves. In a subdued voice, he says, “Earlier when you suddenly disappeared in front of me, I...”

Just then, Zhao Yunlan finally comes to his senses again, strides over and grabs Shen Wei’s hand. Shen Wei shrinks away violently, instinctively flinching, only to be grabbed more tightly by Zhao Yunlan who says heartlessly, “So you’re the one from eleven years on? Then do you remember how many times we’ve had drunk, messy sex?”

Shen Wei is speechless.

After a moment, he decides to ignore his nonsense and skip the conversation altogether. He lifts his hand and pulls the water dragon pearl from Zhao Yunlan’s neck. When it touches his palm, it hisses like cold water hitting a hot frying pan. Thick black smoke rises from it and it transforms into a piece of scale. Zhao Yunlan looks on with wide eyes, trying to get closer, but Shen Wei turns his hand over so he can’t see it anymore.

“Wait, what is that?” Zhao Yunlan says. “It doesn’t look like a fish scale. It’s a type of reptile... is it snake?”

“You don’t know what it is but you hang it around your neck,” Shen Wei says, bad-tempered. “And it... and it comes from someone else’s body. Do you not think it’s dirty?”

Zhao Yunlan looks at him innocently.

They stare at each other for a moment. Then, at the end of his tether, Shen Wei turns his head. A big hole is ripped open behind him and he roughly pushes Zhao Yunlan in head-first.

There's a flow of light and shadow in front of Zhao Yunlan, and he's submerged in a large body of water. Caught off guard, he forgot he can no longer breathe underwater and didn't hold his breath. He's swearing inwardly, expecting to choke on the water, but then Shen Wei pulls him in and pries his lips open with a soft tongue, passing breath to him.

Shen Wei rapidly takes him upward. Every time he's out of breath, Shen Wei passes him another. After four or five times of this, they already break water.

Zhao Yunlan recalls how his dive down took so long, he almost fell asleep in the middle. He realises that he has now experienced what 'fast as lightning' means.

Shen Wei lifts him onto a ferry boat without sparing a glance for the ferryman, who's timidly huddling aside. He grabs Zhao Yunlan's chin. "The water of the River of Forgetfulness mustn't be drunk by mortals. Did you swallow any? How are you feeling?"

Zhao Yunlan wipes water off his face, and considers how short the trip seemed. "I feel like I rode a torpedo."

Shen Wei lets him go. Having just come out of the water, Zhao Yunlan has somewhat shaky legs. He falls heavily onto the ferry, nearly knocking it over. The next moment, he hears a 'plop'. The witless ferryman finally couldn't bear it anymore and has jumped overboard into the river.

Shen Wei is startled and quickly bends over to grab his arm. "What's wrong?"

But Zhao Yunlan doesn't use Shen Wei's support to stand up. His hand, soaked and white from the River of Forgetfulness, is so weak that it almost slips out of Shen Wei's grasp.

Zhao Yunlan has already been in the Underworld for too long. His lips are almost bloodless. He leans against the edge of the boat, his eyelids heavy, and groans, "I feel dizzy."

"I'll take you up at once." As Shen Wei speaks, he tries to help Zhao Yunlan stand up. But whether Zhao Yunlan is purposefully not going along with it or whether he's really out of strength, he keeps sliding down. Shen Wei has no choice but to carry him. But Zhao Yunlan isn't some slight little girl. Even if Shen Wei doesn't mind how heavy he is, Zhao Yunlan's height makes carrying him very awkward. When Zhao Yunlan was completely unconscious, it was still all right... but now, maybe because Zhao Yunlan feels a little uncomfortable, he keeps moving around. Whenever he moves, Shen Wei's grip slips.

In the end, Shen Wei has no choice but to carry him on his back.

Zhao Yunlan mumbles against Shen Wei's ear, "Remember the coat."

"What coat?"

As he speaks, a feral-ghost ferryman surfaces and grabs hold of the boat. He puts the folded coat neatly on top, without so much as a crooked corner. Shen Wei, stunned, has to take the coat with him.

He carries Zhao Yunlan on his back all the way to his home and puts him gently down on his bed. He turns toward the kitchen to heat some water. Who knew that the moment he moved, the 'dying' Zhao Yunlan would suddenly leap up, jump on him like a tiger, and pin him to the bed. Now that his eyes are open, they shine with a dazzling light. He lowers his head and touches Shen Wei's nose with his.

"What are you going to do?"

Shen Wei only now realises that he's been fooled. "So... you're all right?"

Zhao Yunlan laughs silently. "I have a problem, a big one. My wife ran away from home. Oh, baby, you shouldn't run away, you're so easily fooled. What if you get abducted and sold?"

Shen Wei is seething¹⁸⁵. Too angry for words, he pushes Zhao Yunlan away. Finally he bursts out, "You're talking bullshit."

Zhao Yunlan grabs Shen Wei's coat with a grin and holds it like a pillow in his arms. He keeps grinning and rolling around on the bed, burying his face in the coat and inhaling deeply right in front of Shen Wei.

"Ooh, you're scolding me! Somewhere in the world, another baby panda must have been born. It's so nice to hear! Scold me more!"

Zhao Yunlan is acting like a sex-obsessed maniac, so Shen Wei reaches out to tug the coat away from him: "Give it to me!"

Zhao Yunlan keeps rolling around on the bed and clutching the coat like he's crazy. He leers at Shen Wei. "I won't give it to you. If I give it to you, what will I use to masturbate with?"

Shen Wei is both embarrassed and angry. All words flee his mind, and his face turns bright red.

Zhao Yunlan looks up and says solemnly, "You look like you really want to murder your husband."

Wordlessly, Shen Wei kneels on the bed and makes a grab for the coat. Zhao Yunlan just keeps rolling. Shen Wei catches a corner of the coat and pulls, but Zhao Yunlan simply continues to roll... and consequently rolls onto the floor with a crash.

The two of them stare at each other. After a silent moment, they both burst into laughter.

Zhao Yunlan sits up, his upper body leaning on the bed, and looks at Shen Wei with a smile. Suddenly, he says, "Hey, baby, let me ask you something."

Shen Wei looks at him from above.

Zhao Yunlan uses a casual tone, like a random chat. "Is the Houtu Seal about to break? What do you intend to do?"

Shen Wei is stunned.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "Do you want me to be with you forever? Die together with you?"

Shen Wei's hand on the bedspread clenches violently, and Zhao Yunlan quickly reaches over to hold it. His smile is genuine and clear, without a hint of falsity or doubt.

"In fact, the 'death' that Shennong mentioned...it's chaos, isn't it?" Zhao Yunlan's gentle voice seems like thunder in Shen Wei's ears. "You didn't let Shennong finish... but I understood anyway."

As he speaks, he stands up, bends over and hugs Shen Wei, who's tense all over. "You've never asked me for anything, so I could never win your favour by pleasing you. Truthfully, if there's anything you want, you can just tell me. As long as I have it... why would you lie to me?"

Chapter 90

Shen Wei doesn't utter a single word. Zhao Yunlan slowly lowers his head, raises his hand, and rests his chin in it. He dials back the smile on his face, but his eyes aren't cold, just helpless and a little sad. But he could never treat Shen Wei like a case, or face him like a suspect in the interrogation room.

"Look at me," he says. "The things you've done, I want you to explain them to me one by one; I don't want to waste my brain cells guessing. Shen Wei, I love you, and I don't want to suspect you. I've already brooded too much over some of those things. It might hurt my feelings, but I don't want to hear the truth from others. I've crossed the line for you again and again, and violated so many rules, but if you're like this again..."

He pauses briefly before going on in an even voice, "...then I'm really going to turn my back on you."

His expression is peaceful and his tone quite different from his usual temper. He doesn't look aggressive at all, his usually lively eyebrows drooping. For a moment, it looks like the grand mountain sage Kunlun from Shen Wei's memory is superimposed on him, the images matching perfectly, as if he'd been reborn.

Intense fear surges in Shen Wei's heart. He has disdained the world since he was born and has never known fear, but now he's so afraid, he's shaking all over.

'He knows,' Shen Wei thinks. 'Even though I plotted to the best of my ability, he still knows.'

At the peak of panic, the ten-thousand-year-old Ghost King almost wants to follow his instinct, rush and simply kill this man, deal with

the problem as crudely as others of his race. He could swallow the enemy's flesh and blood until they're mingled with his own, and then there would be nothing in the world that could threaten him and make him tremble at the slightest possibility of loss.

But Shen Wei is no longer the Little Ghost King of ten thousand years ago, and his heart is no longer a blank slate. He has cruelly suppressed his true instinct and nature, and turned himself into what Lord Kunlun once described as a 'gentle and upright person'.

The habit of restraint is carved into his bones by now.

Shen Wei's breath has stopped, and his face has lost all remaining blood, looking as pale as a field of snow.

A chilling flow wells up from his heart like a calm spring; not intense, but instantly penetrating his whole body. When he returns to his senses, he finds his limbs are numb.

Zhao Yunlan is waiting for him with endless patience – it seems that he could spend all the patience of his life on Shen Wei.

He's gently running his fingers through Shen Wei's hair, carefully stroking, over and over, unable to express what he feels. Winding Shen Wei's soft hair unconsciously around his fingers, he suddenly remembers the long hair spread out on the bed that morning.

Magnificent and incomparable – and it feels like a lifetime ago.

He stays like this for a while, unable to handle his conflicting emotions¹⁸⁶. His head knows he's dealing with a serious matter, but his heart doesn't want to think at all.

Sometimes, when a person is faced with a dilemma, they hope that time will stop at that moment, so they can stay where they are without going forward or looking back and just keep lying to themselves.

But the hands of all clocks in the world move forward. Time won't stop for anyone.

Zhao Yunlan closes his eyes and stops moving. After a while, he opens them again; he drags the desk chair across from Shen Wei and the coffee table between them. Then he walks into the kitchen and pulls out a dusty tea set from a cupboard that hasn't been opened in a while.

He's the type who eats instant noodles out of plastic buckets, just to avoid washing a bowl. Now he spends twenty minutes clumsily washing the whole set of teapot and teacups.

It seems he's trying to calm himself down by finding something to do.

Then he puts the wooden tea tray on the coffee table and silently turns on the stove to boil water in a small kettle. Bringing out a tea caddy from underneath the table, he looks up and asks Shen Wei, "Is Iron Goddess of Mercy¹⁸⁷ OK?"

Shen Wei doesn't care whether it's Mercy or Mud¹⁸⁸, he just stares at Zhao Yunlan.

When Zhao Yunlan goes into the kitchen, Shen Wei's gaze follows him there. When he washes the cups, Shen Wei's gaze follows him to the sink. It's as if Zhao Yunlan would disappear if he looked away for just a moment.

Zhao Yunlan silently heats the cup, rinses the tea leaves, and finally puts the first cup of tea in front of Shen Wei.

A delicate fragrance mingles with the steam and fills the air. Unfortunately, nobody is of a mind to appreciate it.

Shen Wei absentmindedly picks up the small cup, but he's shaking so hard, he spills almost half the tea in it.

Only when he notices he's scalded does he look down. He steadies his hands and remains still for a while. Then he lifts the cup to his mouth again and takes a gentle sip. Hoarsely, he asks, "How did you know?"

"The great god's memories were very elaborate. Very... intricate." Zhao Yunlan tilts his head slightly, listening, as if he's waiting for the water to boil. "It was a sophisticated series of almost everything I knew at the time, ingeniously connected to tell a completely different story. It made me feel quite overwhelmed in that moment, but there were also enough holes in it that once I'd calmed down, I noticed that something was wrong with it right away."

Shen Wei's face is expressionless. Like that, his calm and beautiful features are captivating, almost enchanting.

"In fact, I should've realised that it would be silly if others made the false memory in the Holy Tree to mislead me. Because you were with me then. If I doubted the story, wouldn't I just have asked you? If there was a difference between your words and the story itself, who would I choose to believe?" Zhao Yunlan looks down at him. "So you inferred what I know from my talk with Ghost Face on the top of Mount Kunlun, right?"

Shen Wei is silent for a moment; then he admits frankly, "Yes."

The situation has already escalated this far. Trying to evade or cover it up is beneath him. He simply chooses to face it calmly.

Zhao Yunlan looks at him without blinking. "You made up such a sophisticated story in such a short time. How are you so amazing? Ghost Face says he's your twin, but your DNA must be totally different. Apart from looking the same, I don't see any resemblance between you two. Your intelligence is on a totally different level."

Shen Wei stays silent, his posture upright like in a Zen meditation.

"At that time, everything pointed towards Shennong. In your story, you gave Shennong a special role, and then deliberately used him to give that speech about long life and death. Is it because you guessed that that meddling medicine bowl would come out to remind me of it once it sensed any trouble?" Zhao Yunlan smiles bitterly. "You can bet on it. You're not just amazing, you're also lucky."

Shen Wei is silent for a while longer, then admits again: "Yes."

"I really like you a lot... I've never liked anyone so much in my whole life." As Zhao Yunlan says this, there's a moment where his face twists with sadness, but it vanishes again in a flash, like an illusion. He falters, and his voice is husky when he continues. "I don't want to doubt you. When I tried to sort through the misleading memories to find out who was deliberately deceiving me, I didn't even consider it might be you."

Shen Wei is still sitting there with a Zen expression, but suddenly a tendon in the back of his hand starts jumping ferociously.

"The second time I felt something was wrong, I was in front of Nüwa's Great Seal," Zhao Yunlan says softly. "Inside, it was mostly about things that happened when you and I were together. Nüwa just appeared very briefly, to leave behind two misleading statements. They were quite ingenious and each of them implied that what happened back then was a tragedy, and that the source of the tragedy was Shennong."

Zhao Yunlan breathes out a gentle sigh. "But this time you weren't so lucky. I met Ghost Face. He accidentally mentioned to me that all of Nüwa's memories are contained in the Seal. I was confused – all of Nüwa's memories amount to only a couple of statements? So I didn't respond. I asked him about the relationship between the soul fire from my left shoulder and Shennong, and his reaction was as if I should've known all along.

"Then he burst into laughter, and he tried to tell me something but you interrupted him with some force. Now that I think of it, he probably knows that you interfered with the memories in the Great Seal stone. But I guess this time you didn't invent anything, you only deleted some memories and purposely left some behind."

Shen Wei neither admits nor denies. By then, it's almost dusk. Without lights on, the room is dimming. Shen Wei looks entirely unmoved, like a statue of a god in a temple.

"But even though my gut-feeling pointed me in your direction, I still subconsciously removed you from the pool of suspects. Do you think I'm maybe a bit dim-witted?" Zhao Yunlan sighs. "I used to think that clever people called themselves fools out of modesty, but now I'm finding out I'm really and truly a fool."

"I was deeply suspicious of Shennong and when I saw the old man... was that Shennong himself?"

"No," Shen Wei said. "Shennong is dead. It was just an illusion of how he was when alive."

"No wonder then he could laugh so much after being cut in half." Zhao Yunlan sighs and holds his hand out to Shen Wei. "The Water Dragon Pearl... I mean, that scale, can you give it back to me now?"

Shen Wei hesitates for a moment, but he takes out the pearl-turned-scale and puts it next to the tea tray.

Zhao Yunlan picks it up with two fingers and examines it thoroughly. "It's like a snake scale. Is it Fuxi's, or Nüwa's? "

Shen Wei seems to have turned into a robot, forced to answer any questions he's asked. "It's Nüwa's."

"The Water Dragon Pearl took me back to eleven years ago. I shadowed Shennong's medicine bowl when it went down the Road

to the Underworld, and then I saw you. You were interacting with the medicine bowl that's attached to my father, and it didn't look like you were getting on with each other. To me, you seemed to be acting like a stranger.

"I didn't want it to be true, but I felt it was, so I went to the Ghost City and bought a book – the one I traced back to the source two days ago. There, the owner of the store in the Ghost City told me that I myself bought it eleven years ago. So basically, the existence of the book can prove that everything I saw happened."

Shen Wei frowns.

"The name of that book is the *Record of Ancient Secrets*. After I read it, I went to the top of Kunlun mountain. If it weren't for that book, I might not have gone to Kunlun at all." Zhao Yunlan slows down. Suddenly he's craving a cigarette. He falls silent and gently knocks his lighter against the tabletop.

A tiny flame leaps up and with a whooshing sound ignites the cigarette paper in a flash.

"I had the book on me at the time, but when I was taken back to eleven years ago, the pages became blank. Because there was an identical copy in that dimension already. When you brought me back, it disappeared... by the way, I meant to ask, how did you bring me back?"

"The Soul Slashing Blade can slice apart anything." Shen Wei gently touches the middle of Zhao Yunlan's brow with a finger. In the reflection of his eyes, Zhao Yunlan can see a golden glow on his forehead. He hears Shen Wei say, "Your soul bears my mark. As long as I have enough time, I can find you. That book – the *Record of Ancient Secrets* – what happened to it?"

"Eleven years ago, the writing disappeared, leaving it blank. I threw it into the River of Forgetfulness."

Shen Wei looks at Zhao Yunlan. With a mind as ingenious as his, he must already know what Shennong has done.

"Shennong reminded me to be wary of you, but he also told me another thing – not the last thing he meant to say to me, but what he'd started to say when I was taken away by the Water Dragon Pearl. He hinted that I'm reincarnating."

Shen Wei doesn't say a word.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "You see, I bought the book and found it several years later. After reading it, and suspecting something, I went to look for its origin, and found that the buyer was myself. Then I got transported eleven years into the past, when I really bought the book. It's a time loop. And after I left the loop, the *Record of Ancient Secrets* disappeared, and remained in that loop forever. People living on a giant sphere can't reach the boundary, and the path around a fixed circle is endless. Within the cycle of reincarnation, life follows death, and death follows life. Without any essential difference between life and death, death loses its meaning, which also fits the theory of Fuxi's Eight Trigrams."

Shen Wei suddenly bows his head, and can't help laughing at himself: "You don't need to say more, I understand."

Zhao Yunlan blows out a smoke ring and is silent.

"So you knew even back then that the crudely faked memories in the Holy Tree were not made by Shennong. A great sage is a great sage, after all. Shennong knew everything, the past and the future. He left behind his phantom self and Nüwa's snake scale, and he told the stories that make up the *Record of Ancient Secrets*. He predicted everything that is happening now. Everything is connected, the snake bites its tail. This is the work of the first of the Great Ones," Shen Wei says softly. "Of course I cannot match him."

Zhao Yunlan squints through a puff of smoke, picks up the teapot and pours another cup of tea for Shen Wei. "No, you're just different people, occupying different positions. Incidentally, when 'I' was raising the flag of rebellion in the Holy Tree, the anger and pain in my heart weren't mine, but yours?"

Shen Wei lifts the tiny porcelain cup to his nose as if to smell the tea, but he's just going through the motions. At last, he smiles wryly. "I only hate that I wasn't born earlier and didn't mature sooner. In the end, I couldn't be there for the war between the Gods and the demons."

Zhao Yunlan picks up the kettle and pours more hot water into the teapot: "You've run rings around me with all your lies; can you tell me the truth now?"

Shen Wei asks softly, "Do you really want to hear it?"

Zhao Yunlan looks straight into his eyes. "You said it yourself: no matter what, I will never hate you."

Chapter 91

Guo Changcheng's phone keeps buzzing, the screen showing an unfamiliar number that looks neither like a mobile number nor like a proper landline number. It starts with a lot of fours. It looks like a home shopping channel number to Guo Changcheng, so he assumes it's trying to sell him something. Everyone else is discussing important matters, and even though he can't quite follow, he makes an effort to look attentive and ignores the constant buzzing of his phone.

Even though they've been talking for a long time, they're nowhere near the end of the discussion. Chu Shuzhi keeps harping on about the Water Dragon Pearl from Fourth Uncle Snake. He lives in graveyards all year round and pursues the Path of the Undead, so his thoughts can be quite dark sometimes. He's a total conspiracy theorist.

"Your Fourth Uncle definitely knows something," Chu Shuzhi insists. "Otherwise why would he suddenly want to take you away now, and just so happen to ask you to give Chief Zhao the Water Dragon Pearl?"

Zhu Hong has her arms folded in front of her chest, and frowns as she lets out a sigh.

The humans and ghosts in the office all fall silent. Just then Lao Li, the daytime receptionist with a foible for bone carvings, suddenly speaks up. "Actually I... I have a source of information."

Everyone looks at him at once. Lao Li seems a little embarrassed and smiles awkwardly. "I'm an old loner, with nothing much to do after work. Normally, I like to go down to Antique Street and play Xiangqi¹⁸⁹ with some old friends. Over the last two days, I heard one of them mention this. He says that the house-guarding snakes his

family keeps have all left in the past two days, not even eating their offerings. The same has happened in other households. It seems like the whole Snake Tribe is moving out of Dragon City.”

Zhu Hong is stunned. “This... my Fourth Uncle didn’t actually tell me this.”

“Not just the Snake Tribe. Look, it's almost spring, but is there even half a crow in the city? That bunch of Crow Tribe idiots, if there’s so much as some wind and stirring of grass, they run away faster than rats.” Saying ‘rats’, Da Qing makes a show of wrinkling his nose to express his considerable disdain—for a cat, just about everything despicable in the world can be described with the word ‘rat’.

“My Fourth Uncle, he...” Zhu Hong pauses, the creases between her brows deepening further. Fourth Uncle Snake brought her up since she was a child, and to her, he basically seems omnipotent. She has never seen him troubled by anything; in her mind, as long as the Snake Tribe has him, the sky can never fall.

Zhu Hong suspects that he might not have told her anything for fear that her feelings for Zhao Yunlan run too deep; while Zhao Yunlan’s fine, she might lose hope and leave quietly, but if she knew he was in danger, she couldn’t just walk away.

But how big does the problem have to be for Fourth Uncle Snake to straight up move away the entire Snake Tribe, without even stopping to think of possible solutions?

Out of all of them, only Da Qing is vaguely aware: whether it's the abnormal activity of the ghosts or that strange book from eleven years ago, it all seems to point toward the events that happened over 5000 years in the past. That was a time when the skies collapsed and the earth caved in, and a number of gods died. It was definitely no trifling matter.

And yet, he also clearly sees Zhao Yunlan’s attitude.

Since he was little, Zhao Yunlan has always been someone to take the easy way out, and he's very skilled at getting people together and establishing groups. But once he's assigned specific tasks for work, he goes impotent all of a sudden and delegates everything to anyone even slightly less lazy than he is. Sometimes he's even too lazy to read the reports of the people he sent out to investigate. He'll sit in his chair acting all cool¹⁹⁰, hypocritically making people turn their report into a Powerpoint presentation and read out all the contents to him.

But concerning what he, or rather the Guardian Order, is facing right now? Other than occasionally asking them to check some small detail, Zhao Yunlan seems to be keeping everything to himself, not disclosing the slightest bit of information. He likely knows that if he involves his people, they might end up as cannon fodder, so he wants to shoulder everything by himself.

The black cat looks around, and when his gaze lands on Guo Changcheng, he finds a random excuse to interrupt everyone's clueless guesswork. "Xiao Guo, your phone is buzzing so hard it's shaking itself to pieces. Isn't your hand numb yet? Go take the call! The way I see it, discussing it any longer won't get us anywhere. Those who've been on day shift, go home to rest; Sang Zan, Wang Zheng, go out to his house on your night shift, check if he's come back. If Chief Zhao isn't back by daybreak tomorrow, we'll go to the Underworld to look for him. If worse comes to worst.... There's no shame in asking them for assistance once in a while."

With that, the cat jumps on the table, looking very much like the deputy taking over for the absent leader. Soberly, he commands, "Right, Zhu Hong, you'll call Lin Jing in a bit, ask him whether he's on the train yet and exactly when he'll get back."

Zhu Hong makes an affirmative noise and reaches out to pat his fur, then casually scratches his chin while she's at it.

Da Qing immediately turns from a domineering tyrant into a lazy, gluttonous kitty. Her scritch is so comfortable, he puts his front paws on the table to stretch out his back, enjoying himself so much that he lets out a long, high “meow”.

There are some suppressed chuckles in the office.

Da Qing shakes his head violently, quickly pushes Zhu Hong’s hand away with a paw, and demands, “What are you doing? Stop this improper touching¹⁹¹ and show me some respect!”

Next to him, Lao Li is casually stroking the white bone ring on his hand and asks politely, with an air of flattery, “Da Qing, you’ve been busy all day, do you want some dried fish? Yesterday I also fried some at home...”

Da Qing tries to look indifferent, but his pricked-up ears betray him. Eventually, he reaches out a paw with an aloof manner reminiscent of royalty indicating ‘you may lend me a hand’, and lets Lao Li carry him away.

Guo Changcheng finally takes the call that’s been nagging him all day. His domestic knock-off phone is particularly loud, and even from two steps away, people can hear what the other end is saying. The speaker has a thick foreign accent and speaks at lightning speed¹⁹². Chu Shuzhi observes how Guo Changcheng listens politely to the other person’s entire long diatribe before weakly saying, “My apologies, I couldn’t hear very clearly... could you s-say it again a bit slower?”

The other end of the line goes silent for two seconds, then suddenly there’s a low sobbing sound.

Guo Changcheng’s phone may be truly awful, but those sobs are exceptional, flowing out from the speakers across the entire office

room like waves of water. Chu Shuzhi, who has been packing his things to leave, stops and turns around. He snatches Guo Changcheng's phone, presses the hands-free button, and places it on the table.

Guo Changcheng is stunned. Chu Shuzhi puts his index finger to his lips. He listens carefully, then pulls out a pen from the penholder on the table. On the memo pad, he writes: 'It's a ghost wail.'

Guo Changcheng has goosebumps all over.

Chu Shuzhi rapidly writes again: 'Tell her to stop crying, ask her what's going on.'

Guo Changcheng does as he's told. After quite a while, the crying from the other end subsides a little. Sobbing and sniffing, the person tries very hard to speak in broken Mandarin. "Teacher Guo, do you remember me? Three years ago you came to my house for a home visit when you were teaching. My daughter is called Cui Xiuyun. I gave you a bowl of vegetable tofu."

Guo Changcheng is stunned. "Ah! I remember! I remember you!"

The other end hiccups. "Xiuyun is missing."

The girl he met three years ago should be 15 or 16 years old now. He asks, "How could such a big girl be missing? Is it possible that she's gone hiking in the mountains by herself?"

Chu Shuzhi watches him with interest. Guo Changcheng's is now speaking louder, and more smoothly.

Whenever the other party gets desperate, she starts sobbing and her accent gets stronger. Communication between the two sides is difficult and it takes a while. They learn that the young girl's father worked out of town and earned some money. He bought her a mobile phone which was considered quite advanced in those parts,

and after she learned how to use the internet, she very quickly made a couple of dubious internet friends. One of them even came all the way to see her, promising to take her to Dragon City to find a part-time job, and whisked the silly girl away just like that.

When her family found out, all they found was a little note.

Guo Changcheng glances up to see Chu Shuzhi writing: 'Ask her if she can leave the region, come to Dragon City.'

Guo Changcheng asks, and the other person suddenly turns stuttering and hesitant. "I... I can't leave the village, I... I'm a bit sick..."

Chu Shuzhi nods. This spirit is bound to a particular location.

Guo Changcheng asks, "Is there anyone else in the family?"

"There's only an old grandma... You're the only person I know in Dragon City. Teacher Guo, help me out, help me find her, my daughter's still so young, she doesn't know anything..."

Dragon City is big, with lots of traffic. Looking for one person will be like looking for a needle in a haystack. And even though Guo Changcheng has met the girl, he hasn't seen her in 3 years – who can tell how her looks may have changed.

Chu Shuzhi shrugs, writing on the paper. 'Don't randomly promise things to a ghost, you'll be inviting trouble.'

Nobody could've known that as soon as the words 'randomly promise' are written, Guo Changcheng will do just that! "All right, don't worry yourself, auntie, I promise I'll find and bring back your child!"

The tip of Chu Shuzhi's pen slips, leaving a long mark down the paper. He's just about to scold Guo Changcheng for his

shortcomings¹⁹³, when he sees the white light representing merit on Guo Changcheng's body flash for a moment. Unexpectedly, it changes colour so that for a split-second, it seems to glow a fiery orange.

Taken aback, he clutches Guo Changcheng's shoulder. Guo Changcheng has just hung up and gives him a puzzled look.

"N-nothing, my eyes must have deceived me," Chu Shuzhi mutters. He thinks for a moment, then puts his bag back down. "How do you plan on looking for this person? I'll help you."

Around this time, the ghosts Wang Zheng and Sang Zan have arrived at Zhao Yunlan's house and are politely knocking on the door. There's no sound from inside, so Wang Zheng takes Sang Zan and just slips in straight through the door itself. There are no lights on, but the coffee table is in a different spot, the chair and bed both look sat on, and the water kettle is still boiling, almost boiled dry; but there's nobody to be seen.

Sang Zan bends over and fiddles around with the stove, knowing to turn it off without being told. "Someone came and leaved again, two peoples; they leaved before it got duck."

Setting out tea indicates a long conversation; what may they have talked about?

~~~

Earlier that evening: after Zhao Yunlan has finished speaking, Shen Wei stares at him for a long while as though drowning in his eyes. Finally he says, in a low voice, "All right."

Then he falls silent for even longer, his gaze travelling over the white steam curling upward from the tea pot, seemingly lost in a daze.

As he traces back ten thousand years of memories, he suddenly looks very old.

It takes a long time for him to release a small breath. He gives Zhao Yunlan a wry smile: "I... I don't know where to start."

As he speaks, he puts down his tea cup, sits upright on the bed and reaches out towards Zhao Yunlan: "Why don't you come see for yourself?"

Zhao Yunlan feels like he should really still be holding a grudge, but before his brain can catch up, he's already given Shen Wei his hand.

Shen Wei grabs it and with a burst of strength pulls him into his arms. Zhao Yunlan thinks he's about to crash into him and, on reflex, reaches out to brace himself against the edge of the bed. But his fingers seem to pass through a void, and then it's like he's falling into something. He stumbles, but a pair of hands steadies him.

His eyes are wide open but he can't see a thing. All he can do is clutch tightly to the hands holding on to him. "Shen Wei?"

Shen Wei makes a soft sound in response.

Although it's dark, it's not at all quiet around them. There's a sound like wind howling, but Zhao Yunlan can't feel the slightest movement of air. He calms down and listens carefully – it sounds like crying but also a bit like roaring; changing, sometimes high, sometimes low, sometimes close by and sometimes far away.

Zhao Yunlan can't help but ask: "What is that?"

Shen Wei reflexively grips his hand tighter, and only after a while does he say, "Wait a little longer."

Just as he's finished speaking, the world around them lights up. There's the cry of a dragon in the distance, sounding like it's

suffering. The ground is trembling, and then a great ball of fire falls out of mid-air, as if the sun is dropping out of the sky, scorching hot.

With the change from extreme darkness to extreme brightness, tears shoot into Zhao Yunlan's eyes at once, but he endures the pain, unwilling to close them.

He feels like he's witnessing a scene from the creation of the world.

As the fire falls, it shatters into countless shards, sparkling like specks of gold, as if one were stepping on the Milky Way. The scene of overflowing light and colour is breath-stoppingly beautiful. Zhao Yunlan quickly wipes away his tears; he can't bear to even blink.

Then, countless hands reach up from below the scattered tongues of fire, as though they're growing out of the mud, gradually adjusting their own shapes, until eventually they're as tall as human beings and start climbing out of the soil.

No one 'created' them; they emerge, alive, out of the primordial mud.

No one teaches them how to survive, how to reproduce; stumbling across the land made of splintered light, they learn to walk and run, and finally, instinctively, learn how to fight and devour each other.

The ghost tribe, born from the cracks between light and darkness.

A gigantic fire is blazing where the fireball landed, igniting the earth around it. As it burns, the mud underneath begins to transform, slowly expanding into a large flower bud.

It grows bigger and bigger while the fire above it becomes smaller and smaller. Eventually, the fire is completely absorbed into the 'flower bud' made of soil. All the running, feeding and killing ghosts stop what they're doing and simultaneously turn their heads toward it. Suddenly a crack splits through the soil flower, rapidly becoming a

large rift, until - with a bang like pottery burned too long in the kiln - the flower bud shatters into several pieces.

Within it, two shadowy shapes are growing. The nearest of the ghost tribe are sucked in, barely able to struggle, and quickly devoured. With every member of the ghost tribe swallowed, those shadowy figures become clearer. They slowly develop a head, neck, torso, four limbs, facial features and even hair.

Just like the droplets of mud that Nüwa casually flicked out, it's as if all the beings born from the mud are driven in a certain direction by a mysterious force, growing toward the same goal—exactly like the Great Ones.

Perhaps... the Gods and Great Ones that nature brought forth were also born this way.

After a long while, Zhao Yunlan asks, “The thing that fell just then, was that my soul fire? Is that... you and the Ghost Face?”

“That is us... at the time when Chiyou entrusted you with the protection of the shaman and shifter tribes.” Shen Wei’s voice in his ear is deep and calm. “I didn't expect that just a few decades after the first great war between gods and demons, the Water God Gonggong and Emperor Zhuanxu<sup>194</sup> would start another one. The Water God was close to the dragon tribe, and they formed an alliance with the shifter tribe. Then Houyi<sup>195</sup> from the East found Fuxi's Bow, gathered Chiyou's former troops, and sided with the shaman tribes. Shamans, shifters, humans; the three tribes fought and could hardly be pulled apart.

“At that time, the world hadn’t settled into any kind of order yet. Not long after Nüwa created humans, she could only watch as they reproduced in droves, and died in droves. She hadn’t even turned into Houtu<sup>196</sup> yet. So, at that time, the concept of becoming a ghost didn’t exist yet, and of course the so-called ‘cycle of reincarnation’

didn't exist either. For all the people who died in those days, death was simply death. As Shennong said, 'death' is the return to chaos, to the Profane Lands: utterly empty, devoid of living beings, cut off from hope, from the senses, from everything. A return to absolutely nothing. There was nobody who didn't fear 'death', especially those who died whilst holding onto hate. They didn't wish to close their eyes and die contentedly, so they were stuck in between life and death, and their souls remained trapped in the living realm.

"In the two great wars between gods and demons, much blood was shed. The souls of those that hesitated to move on drifted through the air all day, desolately wailing, with no hint of disappearing. Suffering under the scorching sun during the day, some burned up, returning to chaos. Others survived, slowly recovered overnight, and then suffered the same torture again the following day."

Shen Wei falls silent, gazing towards the site of his birth. After a while he says, "Nüwa only then realised that what she had created wasn't virtue, but evil. She provided humans with brilliant but short lifetimes, as delicate and vulnerable as spring flowers. After that short life, she made them suffer the worst hardships – suffering under the burning sun, with no place for their souls to go, always chased by death."

Shen Wei turns his head to face Zhao Yunlan. "Some people say the reason why newborns cry is that they are one step closer to their preordained death. So at the time when Shennong had lost his divinity, he had no choice but to ask for your soul fire. Only the sacred soul of the Mountain God could pacify all the vengeful spirits in the world that died in war, lessen their suffering and let them be at peace a little sooner. This protection you provided the souls is the reason why the Holy Tree that you left behind was later known as the Guardian Order<sup>197</sup>."

The whole time, the crack above their heads has been growing larger and larger. Finally they can see a sliver of sky with weak



moonlight drifting in. Mount Buzhou is on the brink of collapsing completely.

Shen Wei continues, “Shennong carried your soul fire cupped in his hands when he passed Mount Buzhou, and he happened to come across Gonggong riding the heavenly dragon. Bound by duty and unable to turn back, the great dragon crashed into the stone pillar of Mount Buzhou. Its tail clipped Shennong’s shoulder just so; your soul fire fell from Shennong’s hands and by a twist of fate, it landed in the Profane Lands at the foot of Mount Buzhou.”

Shen Wei pauses and gives a cold laugh. “These are the things you told me, I don’t know if they’re true or false. Maybe it was really an accident, or maybe Shennong did it deliberately; who knows?”

At that moment, Zhao Yunlan sees two people landing in the Profane Lands exposed to the human realm. They're Kunlun and Shennong.

Looking at all the demons and monsters in the place, Kunlun seems to be at a loss. “What are all of these?”

Shennong says, “They're born from nature.”

## Chapter 92

This answer makes both Lord Kunlun on the far side of the memory and Zhao Yunlan on the near side fall silent.

Suddenly, it's no longer important whether Shennong dropped the soul fire intentionally. Shennong clutches Kunlun's wrist. His murky old eyes stare at the ignorant and ferocious ghost tribe and he takes two steps forward. He's very old, so Kunlun has no choice but to bend down slightly to support him. When he looks down at Shennong, a shadow passes over his face. Shennong is old; that means he'll die soon.

Kunlun has never experienced 'old age' or 'death' before, but he can already smell the appalling odour of decay on Shennong's body.

"You heard everything I said to Nüwa last time?" Shennong asks.

Kunlun frowns. "Who's in the mood to listen to you guys' endless mysterious ramblings? Just tell me what we should do now. I'm surprised you mention Nüwa. If she finds out that you fumbled the fire and it burned through Fuxi's Great Seal, I'd be surprised if she didn't turn against you. And you even used my soul fire. You really know how to get me into trouble."

Shennong shoots him a glance. "She won't."

Kunlun snorts twice, his words dripping with sarcasm. "I beg to differ."

Shennong coughs feebly for a while. "Life and death are very important. Nobody is born without fear of death; you can't joke about it. However, if you can jump out of the circle of life and death, you'll no longer need to fear."

“I'm going to behave and stand here. I'm not going to jump anywhere and I don't need to fear anything,” Kunlun says coolly. “Seems like the one who should be afraid is you. By the way, the Holy Tree has borne fruit. These past hundred years, there have only been two ripe fruits. I gave one to my cat bro, the other one I saved for you. It can extend your life by a hundred years.”

“Thank you very much.” Shennong smiles. “Actually I'm not afraid of death either. Little Kunlun, you don't understand. No death, no extinction, no godhood. Maybe when we all die, you'll understand.”

Kunlun rolls his eyes and looks around as if trying to find something with which to stuff Shennong's godly mouth.

“There will be hope.” And finally, as they're leaving, Shennong looks at the land teeming with the ghost tribe. “If there can be life in even the most desolate place, is anything impossible?”

Kunlun is helping him cross the rough ground, but on hearing this, he turns his head to look at the two members of the ghost tribe closest to them. One has the other's head in his grasp and is gnawing on it. Kunlun, god of the desolate mountains, frowns. “Okay, old fart, does life as shitty as this even count? Seems to me you're getting senile. You'd better spend your time thinking about how to explain this to Nüwa.”

As Kunlun and Shennong leave the Profane Lands, Shen Wei, who has been silently observing, takes Zhao Yunlan's hand: “Come on.”

The two of them follow along. Only then, Shen Wei says, “Considering how smart you are, it's not that you didn't figure out what Shennong was thinking. It's just that you thought his ideas were too fantastic to agree to.”

Zhao Yunlan pauses, then asks, “So... Shennong wanted to build the wheel of reincarnation. Unless a soul is destroyed entirely, it can reincarnate in the Six Realms, so life becomes death and then life

again—that's what he meant by 'standing outside life and death,' right?"

Shen Wei smiles softly. "Shennong wanted to use the Underworld to separate yin and yang on the verge of death, and set up the wheel of reincarnation there."

"Then it didn't work, or Nüwa wouldn't have sacrificed herself for the Great Seal."

"Do you know why?" Shen Wei stands still, a strange smile on his face. He continues the story without waiting for Zhao Yunlan's answer. "Because members of the ghost tribe have no souls."

Great, soul-less fiends...

"We're nothing but chaos and resentment—no matter our rank, our lives consist of one instinct only: to devour, to plunder, to thirst for the freshest flesh and blood." For the first time, Shen Wei realises that saying these words gives him an unexpected thrill—like the thrill from bearing down on a wound, or from cutting one's own flesh with a knife. "As for me... you raised me to godhood, so I have become a monster: neither human nor god, neither demon nor ghost, nothing but a misfit, unique under the sun."

Zhao Yunlan is lost for words.

Shen Wei smiles gently again. From the moment Zhao Yunlan figured out he was lying to him, Shen Wei's heart has been like a lump of ice stuck fast in his body, chilling and depressing him. Having said these words, he feels miraculous relief.

"Ultimately, no one really knows what the ghost tribe is. Maybe we are just a form of chaos – chaos that can run and move. The Ghost Face was actually right: by a single surge of flame, 'death' itself spawned us, us 'living beings' who aren't born and cannot die. In fact, we're quite a freak accident." Shen Wei's smile fades. He turns

towards Zhao Yunlan, his voice soft and intimate. “But you keep on teasing me recklessly. Do you have any idea what you’re provoking? Do you understand just how dangerous that is?”

Zhao Yunlan hugs him from behind. “Hey, just give me the gist. I don’t want to hear this bullshit.”

His human body heat flows into the hug. Shen Wei feels like a man whose chest was frozen numb swallowing his first mouthful of hot congee, and he almost shivers with it.

He remains silent for a moment, then clasps the hands in front of his chest with his own and continues. “Mount Buzhou collapsed and the sky fell, and that happened to interrupt the battle between humans, shamans, and shifters. It rained continually, and that rain washed the resentment out of the air and into the ground, making the lands barren. Underground, millions of demonic soldiers climbed up from the abyss. You probably saw all this when you were in the Holy Tree.

“The first time I saw you should actually have been at the place where I was born. But you stood too far away and refused to come even a step closer to me, as if I was something filthy. My eyes weren’t fully opened and I could just vaguely make out the shadow of green clothes.”

Shen Wei closes his eyes. He nuzzles his chin gently against Zhao Yunlan’s hands and lowers his voice a little. “But from the moment I was born, I was more ferocious than my brother. At that time, I had devoured more of my tribe members, so I already had the ability to hear, and could roughly understand what you and Shennong were talking about. Unlike him, I have known what I am from birth. I searched for you all over the world, enduring the temptation of human flesh and blood along the way. I still only ate the things that crawled out from underground... Ghost tribe members who are as disgusting as I am.

“I always wanted to ask you: ‘What counts as life?’” Shen Wei feels Zhao Yunlan's hands tighten around him. “I finally met you at the Peach Forest, when you were preparing to go up to Mount Penglai<sup>198</sup>. I didn't expect that when I finally saw you, the question would stick in my throat and I wouldn't be able to get out a single word.

“Why was I going to Mount Penglai?” Zhao Yunlan asked in a hoarse voice.

“Of the three great ancient godly mountains, Buzhou had already fallen. Kunlun was a forbidden area only accessible to gods that ordinary people couldn't reach. Only Penglai could protect the living creatures of the earth. But there were too many of them. Of the three tribes, two at most could go up. The rest could only wait for Nüwa to perfect the technique of mending the sky with the five colourful stones, and leave their fate to the Heavens.” As Shen Wei says this, he suddenly pauses. “I hate the phrase ‘leave your fate to the Heavens’.”

“Wouldn't they just start bashing each other's heads in even more?”

Shen Wei said, “Shennong thought that because you were born as a mountain god, you would favour the shamans and shifters, and abandon the humans. He planned on personally bringing Emperor Zhuangxi to the mountain to see you, but he didn't imagine that you'd set a trap at the foot of Mount Penglai. You arranged a simple altar containing Chiyou's head and placed it right in the middle of the mountain road.

“The shifters had always regarded Chiyou as their ancestor. They were the first to kneel down to pay their respects. The human tribes also respected Chiyou as the God of War, ever since the reign of the Yellow Emperor. So Emperor Zhuangxi stopped them and made them stand behind the shifters, bowing their heads in respect.

“Only the shaman tribes ignored it, busy competing to claim a position on the mountain; they paid no respects and walked right past Chiyou’s head. As soon as they had passed by, Chiyou’s head disappeared and became a road leading up to the mountaintop. Already having walked past, the shaman tribes were deceived and got trapped in the chasm at the bottom of the mountain.”

To this day, the shifter tribes sing praises to the Fall of Mount Buzhou. It was when their rise over the shaman tribes began, claiming a foothold during the great flood and gaining equality with the human race... even though this equality didn’t last very long.

“You took me all the way through that troubled, disaster-stricken land,” Shen Wei says. “From Mount Kunlun to the Peach Forest, and from there to Mount Penglai. We walked to every last corner of the human world, saving people and killing man-eating ghosts. We were even roped into the battles between the different tribes. In the ghost tribe, we’d always regarded each other as potential food. We never developed the concept of ‘kindred’. I didn’t understand anything at that time. Sometimes I thought that you were being wasteful, only killing them and not eating them. And you became more and more silent.”

“Come on, let’s go up the mountain.” Shen Wei turns around and grabs Zhao Yunlan’s waist. Zhao Yunlan only feels the scene before him shift, and then they’re already standing at the foot of the godly mountain. Then Shen Wei leaps up and takes Zhao Yunlan directly to the top of Mount Penglai.

There's no thunder and lightning, only a sky so gloomy and heavy that it looks about to fall down. Rain is stirring up clouds and mist, the water in the air bringing an unspeakable stench with it.

On the mountain top, Zhao Yunlan sees Nüwa – alone, dragging her long serpent tail through the sea of clouds. Kunlun and the young

Ghost King are standing at the cloudy shore and watching her from afar.

Kunlun seems to have changed a lot since Zhao Yunlan first saw him in the Profane Lands. He's thinner now, his naturally deep-set features more haggard. Yet his gaze is clear and steady, particularly striking above his gaunt cheeks.

Nüwa suddenly turns her head, worry marring her beautiful face. "Lord Kunlun, what if Shennong was wrong? What if we were all wrong?"

Kunlun slips his hands into his long sleeves, the wind chasing and flapping his garments. Unperturbed, he says, "It doesn't matter—then this is our atonement, we'll die for a just cause. These primordial lands will see someone rise again, someone as mighty as Pangu or even more powerful, and they'll learn from our mistakes and finish what we could not."

Nüwa sighs, her frown smoothing out. "You're right. Shennong was already wrong once. I hope he isn't wrong again, but... even if he is, we can't turn back. You've truly grown up a lot. Even if I die now, I feel that I can leave this world in your hands."

The Great One's words are as set in stone<sup>199</sup>. In the wake of her voice, Kunlun can feel an immense pressure mercilessly slam down on his shoulders, but he doesn't shake or move. Even the Ghost King behind him doesn't notice anything unusual is happening to him.

And so Kunlun takes a deep breath and extends his hand palm-up to catch the drizzle falling from the Heavens, quietly accepting the tremendous burden now pressing down on his body. "Actually, there's one thing I've been wondering over the past few days: humans are so frail, they can't rid themselves of their greed and anger; they're selfish, stupid and short-sighted, cruel and violent.



Why would creating such useless things bring you merit? Why would Heaven choose humans over and over again?" Kunlun narrows his eyes, gazing out at the five-coloured stones far away in the churning sea of clouds. "Now I understand that the human race is just like Heaven and Earth, just like us."

The corners of Nüwa's mouth show traces of a smile: "How are they just like us?"

"From the moment they're born, humans know they'll die. Each day that passes is a step closer to death. Whether they're heroes and heroines or cowards and villains, the decades pass, ephemeral as clouds and gone with a snap of the finger; all their paths lead to the same end, as if they were born only in order to die."

He smiles faintly. "But you see, every day of their lives they struggle for food, clothing, power, property, feelings, and the ability to live another day—for anything you can imagine. They escape death so many times, and then in a final struggle, they still die."

"I don't understand what you're saying," the young Ghost King at Kunlun's side and Shen Wei at Zhao Yunlan's side say at the same time. To Zhao Yunlan's ears, the youth's clear voice and the man's low one combine to form a strange duet; it makes him feel as if he were there in person, unable to tell himself apart from the illusion of Kunlun.

Words suddenly pop into Zhao Yunlan's head, and he can't help but blurt them out, resonating with Kunlun's voice thousands of years ago. "Sealing away the ghost tribe is unjust, yes. But I already committed genocide when I trapped the shamans and let them all drown in the great flood. This deed already rests on my shoulders, but I have a clean conscience and bear my crime without fear. If we can't build Shennong's wheel of reincarnation and eternal life; if we fail, if we're wrong, if we bring about a worse disaster... then that's just the first failed attempt. If we all die, new gods will come down to

this world and struggle again to achieve eternal life, just like we did—even though we're all well aware that absolute permanence doesn't exist and that we'll die in the end, just like humans do."

Kunlun turns his head to look at the young Ghost King next to him; then his gaze slips past him and seemingly lands upon Zhao Yunlan, thousands of years in the future. Even though he knows Kunlun can't see him, it still feels to Zhao Yunlan as if he's facing himself across an abyss of time and space.

"If 'death' is chaos, then 'life' is ceaseless struggle, right?" Kunlun says, a soft smile appearing on his lips, and small dimples on his cheeks. His smile is a child's but his eyes are those of an old man.

"Nüwa," he says, "you can go ahead. I'm here, so you don't need to worry about what you leave behind."

Having finally heard the complete exchange, Zhao Yunlan understands at last how Shen Wei picked a few words from this compassionate account of the world and humankind and changed their meaning entirely.

Nüwa gives Kunlun a meaningful look. The coloured stones flash and soar across the sky in rainbow brilliance; with a roaring sound, they crash through the heavy clouds, making them erupt into earth-shaking thunder and lightning. The humans and demons on the mountainside can only throw themselves to the ground in worship.

Eventually, the thunder stops, but it takes months before the dark clouds part, auspicious ones appear, and the sun finally shines again upon the desolate, scorched earth.

Nüwa's body, standing silently within the sea of clouds surrounding Mount Penglai, suddenly breaks apart. The three spirit parts of her soul complete the Great Seal once more. Her body transforms into Houtu, and the seven corporeal parts of her soul scatter amongst the

thousand mountains and rivers, allowing tender shoots of grass to show their first green between cracks in the stones.<sup>200</sup>

At some point, old Shennong has also climbed to the mountain top. He says to Kunlun, "I'm leaving too."

With those words, he falls to the ground, stiff and dead. His divine spirit, no longer suppressed by a human body, plunges from the sacred mountain into the ground and turns into the wheel of reincarnation. All the souls lingering in the air, unaware of day and night, are attracted by it and follow it down. The Awl of Mountains and Rivers pierces and subdues the gently trembling earth; the Sundial begins to rotate on top of the Three-Life Stone<sup>201</sup>; the Ink Brush of Virtue, suspended high on the Holy Tree, floats down along the River of Forgetfulness and reemerges with a record of every soul's merits and demerits.

"Just one last thing," Kunlun says lightly. Suddenly the sky above him is shrouded in dark clouds; lightning flashes and thunder rolls as if the gods were about to send down divine punishment. "My soulfire lit up the Profane Lands and let the ghost tribe emerge from the mud, only for me to abandon them. Selfishly deciding whether the ghost tribe should stay or go was indeed a great crime. But there's still something I haven't finished."

Zhao Yunlan watches as Kunlun takes his heart's blood and turns it into a lamp wick and then turns his body into the lamp itself. And suddenly, he feels he has known all these things, not just from what he's seen within the Holy Tree and the stone next to the Great Seal, but rather... they really happened, he just couldn't remember them for a while.

Thus, the wheel of reincarnation is finally completed; life and death have become a circle, and from then on there's neither life nor death.

The primordial essence of Kunlun drains from his body and dissolves, and the mighty mountain gales sweep away the young Ghost King, who'd been sitting by his side crying himself hoarse. Together they sink down to the Underworld, to guard the Great Seal.

Zhao Yunlan turns to Shen Wei. "And then what? Why do you say that you and Shennong are absolutely irreconcilable?"

## Chapter 93

At first, Shen Wei doesn't reply. He looks in the direction where the unbearably sad little Ghost King has disappeared, with a strange smile on his face—as if he were a bit nostalgic, and maybe a bit embarrassed. Eventually, he says gently, “I actually really respect Shennong. More than you and Nüwa, he seemed like a real god.”

“Wait, wait!” Zhao Yunlan lifts his hand to stop him, frowns, and thinks for a moment. “If you ask me, all this is your fault. You don't explain things properly, you've been randomly lying to me, and I feel like my head is about to explode.”

Shen Wei shuts his mouth, waiting for Zhao Yunlan to decide he doesn't want to see him any more... but no matter how long he waits, it doesn't come. It's like he's hanging onto the edge of a cliff by a blade of grass, unable to beg for life or death.

Zhao Yunlan glances at him and suddenly says: “Shen Wei, do you know what the most difficult thing in life actually is?”

Shen Wei turns to look at him.

“It's that I married a difficult scoundrel of a wife with a head too full of ideas. Even if you kick him, he won't let out even one <sup>202</sup>... Well, in a word, sooner or later your endless notions will totally disorient me. <sup>203</sup>”

Shen Wei is speechless.

“That's right,” Zhao Yunlan says, “I'm talking about you. I'm already very disoriented right now.”

Shen Wei thinks he hears a certain hint in these words, though he's not sure. He fixes Zhao Yunlan with a stare which for a moment burns frighteningly bright. "So?"

Zhao Yunlan's reflexes have long been trained by Shen Wei. As long as Shen Wei is even a little sad, he'll do his utmost to coax a smile out of him; but as soon as Shen Wei shows the slightest bit of strength and aggression, Zhao Yunlan can't help but tease him and flirt with him.

So Zhao Yunlan rubs his own chin, making a serious face as if he's a figure of authority. "So... what happens next between us depends on how sincere your confession is, and how much lenience you therefore deserve. Comrade Shen Wei, those who play tricks on the masses will eventually be submerged by the waves from the masses revolting, do you understand?"

Shen Wei's lips move a little, but in the end he says nothing—he's probably long lost the ability to frankly express his feelings that he possessed in his youth.

Zhao Yunlan continues, "First let me work out the sequence before we argue about the things that happened. Starting from when the great beauty Nüwa created people with her spinning leek dance<sup>204</sup>. Kunlun—who seems to be me, by the way—was just out of baby clothes<sup>205</sup>. Being an immature little idiot, I ran my mouth while looking on, and said that there were other things contained within the mud she used to make people. Because I said that, Nüwa found the three evils within the mud: greed, hatred, and obsession<sup>206</sup>. That's when Nüwa foresaw those three characteristics in humankind, which would eventually lead to an irreparable war between gods and demons? Hm, this means..."

Zhao Yunlan pauses. "...the lady was a bit paranoid?"

Shen Wei isn't used to his casual manner, so he's silent for a while; but Zhao Yunlan isn't wrong. He nods reluctantly. "Yes."

"Later, Nüwa called Fuxi and the two built the Great Seal together, suppressed the fire, and formed the Profane Lands," Zhao Yunlan says, then lowers his voice. "Oh, right, I meant to ask, were those two really together like the legends say?"

Shen Wei, still reluctantly, says, "Yes."

"Damn, even gossip can be true! So they lived in peace for a few years. But then, the first war between gods and demons broke out, or rather, the Yellow Emperor fought against Chiyou. As they fought, Chiyou found that his opponent was winning and he couldn't hold out any longer. His spirit left his body and went to Mount Kunlun to find Kunlun, begging the mountain god—that's me—to take care of his followers, the shaman and shifter tribes. But Kunlun, the lazy dog, didn't want any of it. He'd starve before bothering to move a muscle<sup>207</sup>. Of course he also couldn't stand the god's constant begging and kowtowing as if he was beseeching the heavens. Plus, he had a stupid and gluttonous cat who went and accidentally licked Chiyou's blood. So Kunlun was forced to return the favour and offer his help. By the way, that cat was Da Qing right? Fuck, I knew that fatty would fuck up his dad's life."

Shen Wei turns away; he doesn't want to look at this 'dad whose cat fucked up his life'.

"Kunlun protected the shaman and shifter tribes in the first big war between gods and demons. He also gave them a place to live and practice, and looked after them for generations. However, the peace didn't last very long. The second big war between gods and demons began. This time it was a civil war between the Flame Emperor and the Yellow Emperor. The water god Gonggong and Emperor Zhuanxu, a descendant of the Yellow Emperor, joined forces. The Emperor of the East, Houyi, also tried to use the chaos for his own

profit. The war of three worlds entangled the shaman and the shifter tribes once again. This time around, all the tribes had grown, and so the death count was even higher, providing more samples for Shennong. He came to the conclusion that 'death is chaos' and 'souls discontent with chaos suffer more agony'. To sum it up, Nüwa created a human race 'unhappy in life, tormented in death'. And so Shennong and Nüwa came together and discussed how to get rid of death forever. That was when he came up with the idea of reincarnation."

Shen Wei shows an acerbic smile. "Maybe it was because he had become a mortal and had to face the reality of a lifespan as short as an insect's, born in spring and dying in autumn. Maybe he himself was afraid of death."

"Uh, let's put this thought on hold, it's not important for now." Zhao Yunlan continues, "Shennong took the soul fire from my left shoulder, intending to calm the souls. When he arrived at Mount Buzhou, he unfortunately ran into comrade Gonggong, the inventor of suicide bombing, and dropped the fire."

Shen Wei laughs coldly. "I think he did it on purpose. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to persuade Nüwa and so found an excuse. His goal was to establish the wheel of reincarnation in the Underworld all along."

"Come on, stop holding a grudge. He already got his just reward; didn't he fail?" Zhao Yunlan feels for a cigarette and squats down on the ground to light it. Like a big monkey he slings his arms over his knees and wantonly pollutes the air on top of the holy mountain. "As a result, he accidentally discovered the ghost tribe. But you guys were inherently born missing parts: you had no soul. Not only were you unable to enter the reincarnation cycle, the moment the Great Seal cracked, you came onto the surface to make trouble."



“It was a great catastrophe. And so, together, the gods helped the living creatures up holy Mount Penglai; the shaman clan were abandoned for their ingratitude, while the humans and shifters were saved. Nüwa mended the lands and the skies, Shennong died of old age and his spirit entered the reincarnation cycle, Kunlun sealed the four pillars and lastly went to guard the Houtu Great Seal.” At this point, Zhao Yunlan pauses slightly. “Oh, I think I kind of get it.”

Zhao Yunlan, being busy all year, hasn't had the time to get a haircut. It has grown a little bit long, almost covering his ears. When the mountain wind blows, his fringe is swept over the bridge of his nose. Shen Wei bends down and smooths the messy hair away from his forehead. Quietly, he asks, “What do you understand?”

“At that time you were so young. As I was guarding the Great Seal, of course I wouldn't let you escape, so why did I give you Kunlun's divine tendon?” Zhao Yunlan grabs Shen Wei's wrist and looks up. “It was because Shennong was going to kill you, wasn't it? I wanted to protect you, and this was the only thing I could do, in the hope that if I wasn't around anymore, I could pass the power over the hundred thousand mountains on to you.”

“This time you're wrong,” Shen Wei says. “He didn't want to kill me; he wanted to exterminate the entire ghost tribe. Shennong couldn't believe that there were things in this world without a soul. If they didn't have a soul, how could they be considered alive? It was him who facilitated the birth of the ghost tribe and of course he wanted to take responsibility for it and ‘make up for’ his mistake.” As Shen Wei says this, he suddenly starts shaking. “If you hadn't given it to me, if you hadn't... you wouldn't have left me so early.”

Zhao Yunlan laughs gently. “Maybe not that early, but sooner or later.”

“If I'd had a little more time, maybe...”

“Now that you’ve grown from a little beauty into a big beauty, looking back, do you think you’d act differently?”

Shen Wei is unable to respond.

“And then?”

“...And then I attacked you and confined your spirit. I went down to the wheel of reincarnation to beg my enemy Shennong,” Shen Wei says. “The only time I begged in my life—was to beg him.”

“At that time, the cycle of reincarnation was already established, the governing body of the Underworld had been formed and a complete set of laws had been created. I begged him to allow you to enter the reincarnation cycle like a mortal. That way, even if you didn’t remember me every lifetime, you’d at least still be there,” Shen Wei says. “But he didn’t agree. Ancient gods cannot enter reincarnation because reincarnation began with the support of Shennong’s own spirit. Although it could accept the spirits of different humans, demons, and ghosts, it could not withstand a real mountain god. The only exception was...if he personally suppressed all your godly powers and washed your soul to become that of a mortal. That way, Shennong would scatter and die...it would be equivalent to a life for a life, him using his life in exchange for yours.”

“What did you promise him for this?”

“I must forever protect the Great Seal. As long as the Great Seal exists, I exist. If the Great Seal is broken, then I must die along with all of the ghost tribe.” Shen Wei’s fingers are icy cold. “And...I can never see you. If I can’t resist, I will drain your essence and you will die with your soul scattered.”

Shen Wei suddenly breaks away from Zhao Yunlan’s hand to stroke Zhao Yunlan’s face with his palm. Then he takes his chin, forcing him to look up. He speaks carefully. “I kept this promise for thousands of years. Now the Great Seal is breaking; I have arrived at my ending.

Originally I wanted to come quietly and go quietly, but by chance I met you and failed. From that night you really belonged to me... no, from that day you told me for the second time that you will give me your heart, I could no longer let you go.

“I deliberately left false memories in the Holy Tree to mislead you, and then I deliberately let you see me extract blood from my heart for you. I also deliberately left you so that you would come down to the Underworld to find me, and deliberately showed you the edited memories within the Houtu Great Seal. All that was to make you feel guilty, make you unable to leave me, and make you decide in the end to willingly accompany me to death.” Shen Wei’s hand is turning colder and colder. His agitation mounting, his grip also becomes tighter, until Zhao Yunlan’s chin starts to hurt.

“Even now, after you’ve seen through everything, I’m still trying to compel you.” Shen Wei’s voice is very low, almost broken. “Will you choose to die with me and forever belong to the chaos? Or will you choose to let me remove your memories of this life so that you don’t recognize me anymore? You won’t remember me and you and I will no longer have anything to do with each other.”

Because he refused to be deceived, these two paths are finally laid clearly in front of him.

~~~

Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan are at the foot of Mount Penglai in Shen Wei’s memories, so Wang Zheng and Sang Zan come up empty-handed and call No. 4 Bright Avenue. Wang Zheng, maybe subconsciously, feels that it isn’t such a big deal for the Ghost Slayer and their leader to be together, so she speaks in a brisk and reassuring tone.

Despite that, when Guo Changcheng puts down the phone, his eyes go wide with anxiety. “But how do we find her?”

He looks back down at his mobile phone and rummages through his pictures. Eventually, he finds a big group photo; the faces in it are so small they're barely visible. After five minutes, he has come up with a crude and simple plan: "What if I enlarge her photo a bit and then post it to the internet and the newspapers under missing persons?"

"By that time the swindler has sold the girl twice around the human trafficking market already," Chu Shuzhi says. "Why don't you go to Carrefour²⁰⁸ to look for her, it'd be quicker."

Guo Changcheng gives him a perplexed look.

"Well, then tell us where her family is from. How did they come to Dragon City?"

Guo Changcheng names the province and the administrative region. "Of course they aren't from the city. They're from a remote village called Cuijia. From the countryside, you take a long-distance bus for eight hours to get out of the mountains, and then once you're in the next bigger city, you can switch to the train."

"The train is impossible," Chu Shuzhi interrupts. "You need an ID with your real name to take the train. Even if the swindler would do that, we don't know if that little girl even has an ID card. She can't just steal the family residence certificate and run."

Guo Changcheng is stumped.

Chu Shuzhi turns on his computer to check the long-distance bus schedules from the town Guo Changcheng named to Dragon City. He considers for a moment, then also looks up the highway route. "Looks like you have to take National Highway 220 to get into the city from there. That's about a thirty-hour trip. If the child left home yesterday, she should be almost in Dragon City by now."

Guo Changcheng's eyes brighten. "That's right! Chu-ge, you're so smart! We can go to the highway exit and wait, and maybe we'll

meet her.”

Chu Shuzhi lifts his wrist and finds it's almost 11 o'clock. How long would they have to wait?

He thinks to himself that Guo Changcheng must be crazy. Besides, he looks way too cheerful, so he can't help but pour ice water over him. “Human trafficking isn't even part of our duties, can't we just go home and sleep? It's your fault you ran your mouth and casually made an agreement with a ghost.”

Guo Changcheng immediately picks up on the complaint in his words. For a moment, he's stunned, then he starts rubbing his sleeves uneasily. “Chu-ge, why don't...why don't you go ahead home and rest, it's enough if I drive over by myself. Thank you for today. If it wasn't for you I definitely wouldn't have thought to look at the car route.”

Chu Shuzhi frowns.

Guo Changcheng instinctively thinks he's done something wrong, so he bows and apologises at once. “I even troubled you to bring things for me today. I'm really very sorry. Why don't...why don't I treat you to a meal when you have time?”

Chu Shuzhi harrumphs, grabs his coat, and walks out.

Guo Changcheng hesitates wordlessly behind him. Chu Shuzhi is already almost at the door when he notices Guo Changcheng isn't following. He turns his head and says impatiently, “What are you dawdling for? Wasn't it you who wanted to find her? Get over here!”

Guo Changcheng immediately perks up like a freshly watered flower and scuttles after him.

They drive Guo Changcheng's car to the highway exit and wait. Whenever they see a car with a licence plate from the missing girl's

province, they stop and search it.

They wait the whole night.

Although the New Year has passed, Dragon City doesn't enjoy spring temperatures yet; mornings and evenings aren't much different from winter. Anyone standing outside for a while is easily frozen.

Sitting in the heated car for a while, Guo Changcheng becomes sleepy. Chu Shuzhi observes him as his head keeps dropping to his chest. Then he suddenly starts awake, quickly wipes his face, and gets out of the car to look around, only relaxing after confirming that no long-distance buses have passed. His coat wrapped tightly around him, he walks back and forth in the night wind, hoping to make himself wake up a bit. He only comes back to the nice warm car once he's frozen solid.

He comes and goes several times. Chu Shuzhi doesn't say anything, just observes him thoughtfully.

The Zombie King rarely pays attention to Guo Changcheng, but just then, he suddenly feels it's weird... How old is Guo Changcheng? The aura of virtue around his body is so thick he can't see through it, like smog. Even old monks who spend their whole lives free from worldly matters may not accumulate this much virtue. Da Qing said he did everything in secret and didn't let others find out, which would double it... but it still doesn't add up unless Guo Changcheng helped old ladies cross the road every morning, noon, and night.

Just then, another long-distance bus comes along. Once Guo Changcheng sees the licence plate, he jumps out of the car excitedly, readies his badge, and stands in the middle of the road, jumping and waving to stop the bus.

"Tch, idiot," Chu Shuzhi mutters. He looks at Guo Changcheng's back before calling Da Qing. "Hey, night owl, you aren't asleep yet,

right? In that case, I have a question for you.”

Da Qing is in the middle of a dream. In his dream, he's floating on the ocean, gnawing on a big whale in his grasp, thinking that this should be enough food for a year and a half. However, he only manages two bites before the big whale flops about and splashes his face with icy cold water.

Da Qing wakes abruptly. He looks up and sees Sang Zan, who's holding a freezing cold phone receiver against his face. Beaming, Sang Zan says, “Cat Stud. T-telephone.”

Sang Zan has long since learned that “studderer” isn't anything good and stopped using it—now it has become Da Qing's exclusive nickname, and he has shortened it to a sarcastic “stud”.

The ‘Cat Stud’ lifts his head grumpily and puts the receiver to his ear. When he hears Chu Shuzhi's voice, he growls, “Get lost, old man. You wanna die?”

Chu Shuzhi doesn't care for his foul mouth. “Eating right before going to sleep is bad for you. Be careful your tonnage doesn't reach whole new levels by the end of the year. Forget about the lady cats, even dogs won't look at you then. Aren't you afraid of high blood pressure and cholesterol, your eminence?”

Sang Zan watches the Cat Stud sink his claws into his work desk and gouge out a row of deep lines, before he calmly floats away, his book under his arm.

“Whatever you have to say, spit it out or get out. Don't beat around the bush. What do you want so late at night, Chu Shuzhi?”

“Have you ever seen orange-colored virtue before?”

“I have,” Da Qing says, ill-tempered. “I've seen it in all colours of the rainbow. If you collect all seven, you can summon the godly dragon

to perform bow-tying air acrobatics for you.”

“I’m not kidding you.” Chu Shuzhi lowers his voice and glances at the bus parked outside the window. “It’s not always orange. Normally it’s white, but occasionally it’s like it’s on fire and flashes like a flame.”

Da Qing is silent for a moment. “Where did you see that?”

“On Guo Changcheng’s body.”

“That’s impossible,” Da Qing states firmly. “I know the type you’re talking about. That’s not ordinary virtue, it’s Great Virtue. Do you know what that is?”

Chu Shuzhi raises his eyebrows: “Hm?”

“I haven’t seen it with my own eyes, but I heard that back when Nüwa created people, she was surrounded by fire which represented Heaven’s Great Virtue. Now the merits and demerits of all creatures are written in the *Book of Life and Death*. At best, for the higher levels, they’re written on the Ancient Tree of Virtue, by the Ink Brush of Virtue. But it can’t possibly be at that level. You’re bullshitting meow. It’s impossible.”

Chu Shuzhi is stunned. By now, Guo Changcheng has already gotten off the bus. He can see how he’s hanging his head. It seems he didn’t manage to find her this time, either.

Chu Shuzhi lowers his voice and quickly says to Da Qing: “Is Xiao Guo really human?”

“Sure he’s human,” Da Qing says. “Wang Zheng even has his ID registered.”

“I need to check his birth certificate. The kind from a hospital that says ‘male baby born on x year x month x day’,” Chu Shuzhi insists.

"Eh?" Da Qing says. "Fucking humans are too curious. The things you spend your time on..."

"I'm done talking nonsense with you," Chu Shuzhi says, "I'm busy over here. Gonna hang up. Remember to look into it for me." He hangs up before Guo Changcheng gets back into the car.

Chapter 94

Guo Changcheng looks wilted, like a sad homeless person who spends his nights in the waiting halls of railway stations. When he climbs into the driver's cabin, all Chu Shuzhi can think is that he looks like a mess.

"You didn't find her?" Chu Shuzhi asks, even though he already knows the answer.

Guo Changcheng nods silently.

After a moment Chu Shuzhi asks tentatively, "Maybe I was wrong. She might have taken the train, or stayed in the city for a while. How about we go back?"

Guo Changcheng is silent for a while. Staying up so late has slowed down his already not very bright mind. Then he wipes his face hard and says quietly, "I'm sorry Chu-ge, how about... how about you drive back first? I'll wait until I find her, then I'll get a taxi back by myself."

"Get a taxi? Are you planning to stay out here overnight and freeze?" Chu Shuzhi considers, then adds, "You don't have to worry. It doesn't matter that you promised the ghost. It's just an Earthbound spirit with hardly any cultivation, I'll sort it out."

Guo Changcheng stubbornly shakes his head. He's just about to push open the car door and get out, but as soon as his back is turned, Chu Shuzhi's hand shoots out of his pocket. With a 'smack', he slaps a paper talisman on the back of Guo Changcheng's neck.

"What are you? Why are you attached to a person's body?" Chu Shuzhi asks coldly.

Guo Changcheng feels like his limbs are suddenly weighed down with lead. He wants to turn his head to ask Chu Shuzhi what is going on, but his neck has become stiff and he can't twist it. His consciousness seems to float out of his body, and he's looking at his own ridiculous body, and Chu Shuzhi with a serious expression behind him, as if from outside.

Chu Shuzhi frowns, his head raised to look at Guo Changcheng's spirit floating in mid-air—that's definitely a mortal's soul, and it's 100% compatible with the body, nothing out of place.

In other words, the 'spirit' he smacked out with his talisman is truly Guo Changcheng himself.

“So you're really Guo Changcheng?”

Guo Changcheng, floating in the air, wants to say, "Chu-ge, what are you doing?"

But when he opens his mouth, it's as if someone has pressed the 'mute' button on him... or rather, as if he has entered a vacuum field where sound cannot be transmitted. He makes a noise, but can only hear his own voice through his own body; it leaves his mouth but gets no further.

Then, Chu Shuzhi reaches out and removes the talisman. Guo Changcheng feels a huge rush of pressure, like a skeletal hand pressing directly on his soul. It feels very strange and makes Guo Changcheng shudder. Then, in an instant, the floating feeling from before is gone and his body feels unusually heavy.

Guo Changcheng turns his head with trepidation and is met with Chu Shuzhi's analytical gaze.

Guo Changcheng is a little slow, but he realises that his soul had left his body just then. In his understanding, 'the soul leaving the body'

and 'death' are pretty much the same. In other words, Chu Shuzhi nearly smacked him to death with that talisman.

Guo Changcheng cowers, his back tightly pressed against the car door in terror. With his heart beating in his throat, he asks weakly, "Chu... Chu-ge, this— what does this mean..."

"Are you human?" Chu Shuzhi asks.

Guo Changcheng stares at him dumbfounded. He doesn't know what the problem is. Instinctively, he thinks he must have done something so unreasonable and unacceptable that he'd be scolded as 'not human'. But after thinking carefully, he can't recall anything at all. Surely, he can't have committed crimes in his dreams?

"Let me put it this way: do you have any recollection of your parents?"

Guo Changcheng nods.

"Sorry, I know what happened in your family, you're grieving too," Chu Shuzhi apologises without an ounce of sincerity, "but I must get this clear. Are your parents your biological parents? How can you prove they're your biological parents?"

Chu Shuzhi doesn't have very high emotional intelligence, specifically shown in how, even though he knows how to speak politely, he sometimes just finds it too much of a drag and doesn't bother.

If he'd given attitude like this to Zhao Yunlan instead, he'd likely have got a hard smack in return. But Guo Changcheng is a softie; he feels a little awkward hearing this, but shows no sign of losing his temper. He even thinks about it carefully, replying in all seriousness, "I look very much like my uncle and my grandfather when they were young. My paternal grandfather had slightly elevated blood pressure, which

he passed down to my dad. I have some early signs of high blood pressure, too... I'm pretty sure they're my birth parents."

"Then are there any cultivators among your ancestors?"

"Ancestors?" Guo Changcheng is stunned. "I don't know what my ancestors did, I can only think back three generations, at best up to the time of the war²⁰⁹. No one knows what happened before that."

Chu Shuzhi doesn't linger on the issue—even if Guo Changcheng really has some special blood lineage, the last three generations have all been ordinary humans, so it's clear that the blood has been diluted and isn't a decisive factor. Then the last possibility is that he's someone's reincarnation.

But he really has an ordinary mortal soul; even with his Zombie King eyesight, Chu Shuzhi can't see anything unusual.

Just then, the headlights of a bus sweep across the road, and Guo Changcheng grabs Chu Shuzhi's arm. "Chu-ge, bus! Bus!"

Chu Shuzhi hesitates, but puts aside his questions for the time being. "All right, off you go."

Guo Changcheng, as though suddenly pardoned, half-falls, half-rolls out of the car and runs off. What a strange coincidence, just after a bus from the girl's home province has passed by, here's another one. He waves his hand to stop it, hops on the bus, and shows the driver his badge, then spools off his request to check the passengers in the bus, like a newsreader reciting his memorised lines.

Sometimes there are random spot checks during the New Year, so the driver is very calm. He turns back and shouts to the passengers, "Everyone wake up! Wake up! Please cooperate for a moment. ID check!"

Chu Shuzhi has originally stayed in the car some distance away, but just then he feels a twinge in his heart. Cultivators often get these kinds of premonitions. He gets out of the car and walks over, just in time to see a small, skinny girl of around 15 or 16 coming out of the bus behind Guo Changcheng. She's wearing a dingy school uniform, and her head is lowered down to her chest.

“She’s the one?”

Guo Changcheng nods, and adds, “The person who took her away is still on the bu—”

He's barely finished speaking when they hear a 'bang' as someone jumps out of the bus and runs off. There's in fact no evidence that he kidnapped and trafficked the girl. After all, the girl has been sitting on the bus properly, and has followed the person of her own free will. But most likely that person has done something wrong, so as soon as he heard those words he panicked and fled.

But he hasn't even run two steps before he trips over something underfoot and falls on his face. He picks himself up and keeps running, but after two more steps falls on his face again. Only after the third time does Chu Shuzhi, a disinterested ‘civilian’ just slowly wandering over, haul him up by the collar, seizing him and clasping an ice cold object around his wrists.

Of course, because of the extraordinary nature of his job, the Zombie King never uses handcuffs; so due to lack of familiarity with this handcuffing business, he almost fails to put them on properly.

Chu Shuzhi turns his head and sees Guo Changcheng speaking softly to the girl, saying that she shouldn't have run away from home without permission. He's forgotten that the girl's mother is already a ghost and calls her number. “Hello Auntie, don’t worry. We've found your child, and tomorrow I'll find someone to take her back home.”

When he's finished, he naturally gives the phone to the girl. "Your mother was crazy worried about you, and called me in the middle of the night to beg me to find you. Say something to her."

The girl is in a rebellious phase. Even though she recognized Guo Changcheng, to her he's more playmate than teacher, come to help out in the summer holidays during middle school. Her attitude isn't very good anyway, very 'devil may care' and unwilling to submit to discipline. Guo Changcheng has kept talking and talking and she's totally ignored him. But when she hears that sentence, she freezes.

She lifts her head abruptly and looks at him as if she wants to yell 'You liar!' But the words won't leave her mouth. As though guided by a ghost or spirit, she takes the phone with trembling hands. "Hello?"

The person on the other side of the line is silent for a while, but then a loved one's familiar countryside accent once again reaches her ear through the ether, piercing the veil. She really does hear her late mother's voice. "Cui-er."

Tears suddenly start gushing down the girl's face. "Mom!"

Through the phone, her mother says, "Don't cry, Cui-er, don't cry. Listen to Teacher Guo's words. Come back tomorrow, ok? You went so far, Mom can't keep up with you. I worry when I can't see you..."

The young girl in her old school uniform ends up standing at the highway exit to Dragon City in the middle of the night, wailing with unspeakable grief.

Chu Shuzhi isn't good at dealing with that kind of situation, he just wants to catch her and be done with it. Again, he glances at Guo Changcheng, but again, there's that shining orange light thick with virtue.

The light seems even brighter, and for a split second, Chu Shuzhi thinks maybe Guo Changcheng is on fire. He rubs his eyes hard.

When he looks again, it has disappeared.

Firelight...

Though Da Qing already said that it's Heaven's Great Virtue from when Nüwa created man, Chu Shuzhi can't help but have some ominous thoughts. He finally can't hold back any longer and pulls out his phone, dialling Zhao Yunlan's number again. He already tried a few times while waiting for Guo Changcheng in the car, but always got an 'out of service area'. This time, he gets 'this phone has been turned off'.

Does this mean Zhao Yunlan is back?

Chu Shuzhi lights a cigarette, feeling like he's become weak. But this thought gives him some strength again.

They've been watching the highway exit until 4:30am that night, virtually pulling an all-nighter, just like Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan have been wandering Shen Wei's memories the whole night.

~~~

At the top of Mount Penglai, after Shen Wei has finished asking his question, he doesn't wait for Zhao Yunlan to reply, but immediately says, "I won't allow you to think about it; you must answer me now."

Zhao Yunlan raises his head to look into Shen Wei's eyes. After a long while, he reaches out and grasps Shen Wei's wrist. "How much longer will the Great Seal last? Are the remaining days enough for me, this tiny mortal, to live through half my life, nurse my ageing parents, and send them off?"

For a moment, Shen Wei almost doesn't understand what he means. His face is snow white and so are his lips; the only colour all seems to gather in the blood vessels of his eyes. His mind is completely



empty except for the two answers that he himself has spoken, his own words repeating over and over in his mind.

Zhao Yunlan hasn't immediately chosen one of those two options, and it's beyond Shen Wei's ability to comprehend. He doesn't respond to Zhao Yunlan's words.

After a long time, he clutches Zhao Yunlan's shoulder and half crouches down, as if just waking from a dream. "What... say— say it clearly, what do you mean?"

Zhao Yunlan reaches out to touch his hair, softly stroking it for a bit. "Your heart is so heavy. Your schemes are also so heavy... Ah, you're so hard to take care of. Let's go, we're going home."

Shen Wei's eyes widen; he stares at him intensely for a second. Suddenly, he lunges forward and sweeps him up into his arms. Then, after a rush of spinning skies and rolling earth, Zhao Yunlan feels a familiar touch underfoot. He hears a crisp, sharp sound; it seems one of them landed wrong and accidentally knocked the little tea cup off the bedside table, spilling the leftover water.

They pay no attention to it.

Shen Wei pins Zhao Yunlan roughly to the bed, almost violently ripping off his clothes.

"Hey, wait!" Zhao Yunlan grabs Shen Wei's hand. "I'm not drinking your blood."

"To me, it's like a mosquito bite."

"Well, it's not to me." Zhao Yunlan gives him a shove, then reaches for the bedside lamp, but his arms are soon imprisoned.

Shen Wei licks his Adam's apple. Zhao Yunlan lets out an impatient growl. "Enough, stop messing around."

“Even if I dug out my whole heart, I still wouldn’t die straight away. At least I would live longer than the Great Seal,” Shen Wei says in a low voice, his heated breaths brushing against Zhao Yunlan’s collarbones again and again. “Actually, I wondered at the time whether the effect would be better if I ripped out my heart and gave it to you. But I was afraid it would really frighten you, so I only showed you the process of extracting blood.”

Zhao Yunlan is silent for a while, then says dryly, “Much gratitude to you, for still remembering that I’m easily scared.”

Shen Wei nestles closer and delicately kisses the corners of his mouth, the tip of his nose rubbing this way and that on Zhao Yunlan’s face. His fingers are tangled with Zhao Yunlan’s, their half-naked bodies tightly pressed together. “All of that was nothing... Yunlan, there’s only these few decades left. Let’s spend our lifetime together like ordinary mortals?”

In the darkness before dawn, their gazes meet. It's as if Shen Wei is enchanted by Zhao Yunlan's eyes. He kisses him lightly, and it turns into an extremely gentle lingering kiss.

But Zhao Yunlan doesn’t give in easily. After he comes back to his senses, he pulls away sharply in the blink of an eye. His hands slip inside Shen Wei’s clothes to encircle his waist. “Spending a lifetime is very good, but I need to reclaim my position as the man of the household.”

He clamps down around Shen Wei’s waist and pulls sideways with the intention of flipping them over and pushing him down... but nothing happens.

Shen Wei seems to weigh a tonne. Zhao Yunlan remembers lifting Shen Wei up before; he definitely had the weight of a normal human, one you could lift with two hands.

Didn't you fucking say you want to be like a mortal? Then don't pick on mortals like that!

The moral of this story tells us that even if covered in sheepskin – even a sheepskin capable of blushing – a wolf will always be a wolf.

## Chapter 95

The sky has just brightened and the ghosts at No. 4 Bright Avenue have finished work. Da Qing, worried sick, runs anxiously over to Zhao Yunlan's house, fat body wobbling. First he jumps onto the windowsill in the corridor and then, with a fierce lunge like a cat pouncing on food, flies through the air and accurately shoots towards Zhao Yunlan's front door, his paw landing on the doorbell.

Then he slides down the wall like a cat pancake.

The doorbell rings.

Zhao Yunlan often plays video games with headphones on when he's at home. That's why his doorbell is piercingly loud, so he doesn't miss it when someone rings. Even from outside, one can hear it blaring an obnoxious folk song loud enough to wake the dead. Once pressed, it plays the whole song.

But even after it's been playing a long while, no one answers.

Da Qing isn't like Chu Shuzhi, nonstop calling Zhao Yunlan's phone. He just assumes that Zhao Yunlan isn't home.

The black cat walks anxiously back and forth in front of the door. Unconsciously, he starts chasing his own tail and quickly becomes a black whirlwind.

Undeterred, he decides to try again. Just as he has jumped up to the corridor windowsill with his front paws, his back legs still struggling in the air, the door opens from the inside with a quiet 'click'. Startled, he lets go with his paws and lands flat on his ass, like an albatross missing its landing.

He rolls over, staring with wide eyes. Just as he's managed to sit up, his paws slip on the polished floor of the corridor and he falls again, his heavy chin bouncing and wobbling.

This time he collects his limbs with great care, sits up in a dignified manner, sticks out his chest and sucks in his stomach, and quietly meows, "Your Honour."

Shen Wei flicks a finger and Zhao Yunlan's endlessly ringing doorbell immediately falls silent.

Da Qing can't help but straighten his neck even more, and he swallows hard. His eyes unconsciously fall on the clothes Shen Wei is wearing—he's sure that shirt belongs to Zhao Yunlan! Zhao Yunlan, the freak, likes to roll up his sleeves, and he always, ridiculously, asks the dry cleaners to iron his shirts with the sleeves rolled up so that they're folded neatly.

A series of images appears in Da Qing's head, such as them taking off all their clothes and then...and then...

Da Qing lowers his big round head. He needs to adjust his mental state.

"What's wrong?" Shen Wei asks.

"Oh... I just came to see if Chief Zhao is back or not. When he suddenly jumped into the Underworld river, we were all pretty worried."

"He's back but he's resting right now," Shen Wei says quietly. "If you need anything, you can leave a message; I'll pass it to him when he wakes up."

Da Qing immediately gets the picture and decides to back away quickly on his short stubby legs. "Ah...ah then I won't bother you anymore. It's nothing important, just reminding our leader he still

needs to write new work arrangements for New Year's in the next two days and prepare a New Year's speech for the department. It's nothing, nothing. You're busy, I'll get going."

"Ah, wait a moment." Shen Wei smiles a little embarrassedly and says politely, "There's something that I might have to trouble you for..."

Da Qing wisely scuttles back at once. Lifting his head, he says, "Please tell me."

Ten minutes later, an absurdly fat cat pushes open the door of the breakfast shop downstairs with his head. His face is so round, his eyes are almost squeezed out by fat; it makes him look a little sinister. Of course, the stupid humans don't know that this is the expression of the cat's true mood.

The waitress almost trips over him and immediately shouts, "Hey! How did a cat get in here? Get it out, get it out quickly!"

The cat looks up and shoots her a contemptuous glance. Then, he jumps onto the counter and knocks on the table with his front paw. Under the cashier's stupefied gaze, he spits out a piece of paper he's been carrying in his mouth.

The cashier unfolds the paper with trembling hands only to see neatly written: "One soymilk, one tray of buns, three deep-fried bread sticks. Please put them in a sturdy bag. The money is around the cat's neck, please take it. If there's change, please put it back in there. Thank you."

The cashier looks up and tries to figure out where the cat's neck might be. The black cat rolls his eyes and raises his head, revealing a collar in the dense cat fur under his double chin. The cashier finds 30 yuan folded into it.

The cashier raises his voice. "Hey, hey! Everybody, quick, come look! Incredible! Cats can even buy things now!"

Surrounded by onlookers, Da Qing is ready to die of embarrassment and indignation—what a bunch of stupid humans!

~~~

Zhao Yunlan, startled by the sound of the door opening and closing, opens his eyes briefly. "Who is it?"

"Your cat." Shen Wei shuts the door. "He came to see you. I asked him to buy breakfast. Sleep a while longer."

Saying this, he gently pushes Zhao Yunlan back into the quilt, stuffs his hand back underneath, and bends down to kiss his forehead. Reaching out a finger, he smooths away Zhao Yunlan's frown at being abruptly awakened.

When Zhao Yunlan's breathing has evened out again, Shen Wei walks to the window and looks at the plant on the windowsill, which is almost dead from neglect. He reaches out and cups the flower pot, a milky white light radiating from his palm. Like a good rain after a long drought, it makes the withered plant quickly become radiant again and straighten its stalk. After a few moments, it stands upright.

Shen Wei quietly cleans the spray bottle and then carefully sprays water onto the leaves.

Most people have already started their workday and the roads are teeming with traffic. Shen Wei glances outside through the gap in the curtains. At the end of this busy world, far away on the horizon, a column of black smoke is rising from underground all the way towards the sky.

Shen Wei only glances at it briefly, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. Then he lowers his gaze back to the task at hand. He feels

strangely at peace, his whole body relaxed, almost as if it wouldn't be a big deal if he died in this moment.

It's almost noon by the time Zhao Yunlan is woken by the scent of the hot cup of soymilk Shen Wei sets on the bedside table.

He stares at the soymilk for quite a while, then suddenly turns over and sits up. "What did you say this morning? What did you have Da Qing do?"

Shen Wei is wearing glasses and reading a handwritten lesson plan. He says calmly, "Buy breakfast."

Zhao Yunlan sits for a moment with a dumbfounded expression, perhaps making up a scene from "Fat Cat Wandering"²¹⁰ in his mind. Then he shakes his head hard, props his elbows on his knees and his forehead in his hands, and starts laughing.

"What's the matter?"

"For half my life, I thought I was a Casanova, but I was at last crushed by you. Comrade Shen Wei, you're too skilled."

Zhao Yunlan's tone is actually quite sarcastic, and it's not clear whom he's trying to tease. Either way, Shen Wei pretends not to hear him and only smiles at him with a face full of virtue and chastity.

"Oh baby, I beg you, let's stop pretending. And don't pretend to be like this, I can't bear it." Looking at his virtuous and chaste expression gives Zhao Yunlan a toothache. Pressing a hand to his sore waist²¹¹, he drags himself to the bathroom like a half-dead donkey, slamming the door behind him.

~~~

Just as Zhao Yunlan has decided to eat his gloom away, he gets a phone call from Zhu Hong. "Hello, Chief Zhao? Da Qing said you're



back. Are you all right?”

“Hm.” Half a deep-fried breadstick in his mouth, Zhao Yunlan asks, “What’s going on?”

“I need to talk to you about something. Lin Jing bought a train ticket to return to Dragon City last night. I wanted to call him to confirm it this morning, but he didn’t have service. At first I thought it was because he might have lost signal in all those tunnels on his route, but he still isn’t back. I tried to call him just now and it still comes up as ‘out of service area’.”

Zhao Yunlan’s chewing slows. “Has he contacted the office?”

“No.”

“Hmm...” Zhao Yunlan frowns.

The SIU has a stipulation that no matter whether they’re only classifying a case or actually starting to handle it, there should never be fewer than two people involved. Of course, Da Qing also counts.

If, in rare special circumstances, one of them has to act alone, they’re still required to check in with No. 4 Bright Avenue at least twice a day and report back about their location, progress, and any potential danger.

Lin Jing may be unreliable in small matters, but he seldom neglects the big ones. He wouldn’t ignore this rule and go missing for no reason.

Zhao Yunlan ends his call with Zhu Hong and dials Lin Jing’s number. Sure enough, it comes up as ‘out of service area’. He takes a Guardian Order Token out of his pocket, dips his chopsticks in soymilk, and writes Lin Jing’s name on it.

The Guardian Order Token is like a compass. First it sways back and forth, then tentatively picks a direction. A fine red line rises from Lin Jing's name, slowly stretching out; but as it stretches, the colour becomes darker. By the time it extends underneath the table, the string is almost grey.

Then it breaks.

## Chapter 96

Shen Wei lifts his head from his lesson plan and meets Zhao Yunlan's gaze. He bends down to pick up the broken line, but at the slightest touch, it disintegrates into dust and ashes.

Shen Wei withdraws his hand and carefully sniffs his fingertips. "It should be okay for the time being. There is no bad smell or trace of death. He should still be alive, we just cannot contact him. You can rest assured for now."

Without a word, Zhao Yunlan stuffs the last bun into his mouth, but he has lost his appetite. He takes a stack of notepads out from under the table. Surprisingly, this slob of a man is very precise in his time management. There are three sticky notes on the notepads: the one on the very top is labelled 'urgent', the next one 'important', and finally there's 'completed'.

The last section is empty; it's obvious that he's had a very heavy workload lately, and all his tasks were at least 'important'.

The handwriting is incredibly messy, like the scrawl of a doctor riding a rocket through a storm, but Shen Wei can decipher that in the 'urgent' section there's only his own name and the sentence 'find a way to get rid of Dad's broken bowl'. In the 'important' section there's a long list of entries related to his work.

Zhao Yunlan lifts his pen and puts a check mark after Shen Wei's name. He then adds a third item to 'urgent': 'Find Lin Jing ASAP.'

As he writes, Zhao Yunlan says, "Lin Jing actually comes from a long line of Buddhist ancestors. Truth to tell, there's no one else under me with such pure lineage. And he's so unattractive, even his selfies can basically be used as talismans to ward off evil spirits. He's also

very good at pretending to be scared and would never purposefully stir up trouble. Plus, I only asked him to investigate a common case of stealing life force that happens on the seventh of every month. Meaning, he'd normally be the last person I'd worry about."

He drums his fingers on the table. "I have to take someone to go check it out; are you coming?"

Earlier, Shen Wei has been trying to figure out what the people in the Guardian Order are so busy with. Hearing this, he looks up from the check mark near his name and turns a limpid gaze on Zhao Yunlan, his eyes almost overflowing. He's smiling, and doesn't seem to mind at all that Zhao Yunlan wrote his name as illegibly as a dog writing with its paw. "Hm, stealing life force?"

Zhao Yunlan pulls out the message Wang Zheng forwarded to him. "This one. Please, Oh Great One, take a look at it."

Shen Wei, being an antique, has never used a smartphone before. He takes a look at Wang Zheng's words, then wants to look at the photo more closely. But he can't handle the touch screen, and can't enlarge the photo no matter how he tries.

He turns to Zhao Yunlan, who's gulping down soymilk, and says, "Lower your head for a moment, don't look."

Then, he hovers his palm above the smartphone screen with a gesture as if grabbing something from the air. The picture of the dead victim floats into the air like a 3D projection, a shocking visual effect. At first glance, it's almost as if the dead body, face bloated like an eggplant, is lying flat on the dining table.

Curiosity makes Zhao Yunlan raise his head again soon after he lowered it, and he reaps what he sowed: he chokes on his soymilk and almost spews it all over the corpse's face.

It's a prime example of old-fashioned superstition defeating modern technology.

Shen Wei carefully examines the corpse's complexion, and then uses his fingers to 'pinch' the corpse's eyes. It's like he's turned the air into a 3D touch screen which can be zoomed in and out as necessary.

"This man may not have died from taking someone else's life force," Shen Wei says, pointing to the eyes of the corpse which are enlarged to the size of a palm. "Take a look at his eyes."

"I just finished eating..." Zhao Yunlan covers his stomach in pain. But he follows Shen Wei's finger to look at the extremely enlarged eye. The pupil is dilated, but on closer inspection, a human figure seems to be reflected in it.

Zhao Yunlan is stunned, holding down Shen Wei's hand: "Can you enlarge it a bit more?"

Shen Wei shakes his head. "It's only a picture. If I enlarge it any more it won't be clear anymore."

"Oh, it doesn't matter." Zhao Yunlan pulls out a piece of napkin from underneath the table, quickly wipes his mouth, and then rips a piece of paper out of the back of his notepad to sketch the general shape of the shadow. "It's already much better than our crappy part-time technician."

Shen Wei asks casually, "Who is the part-time technician?"

"Zhu Hong."

The feet of the table make a gnashing sound as they grate against the floor.

Zhao Yunlan only feels a chilly gaze land on his bare nape. He feigns ignorance and sprawls on the table, carefully drawing the image inside the corpse's eye with his ballpoint pen. With his back turned to Shen Wei, he secretly smiles in delight.

"Legend has it that the eyes of the dead must be destroyed, otherwise the shadow of the last person they saw will show in them, and the police could find out," Zhao Yunlan says as he draws, "But even Pleasant Goat<sup>212</sup> knows that's impossible, or the criminal police would have nothing to do all day except study ophthalmology. But there's no smoke without fire...folklore always has a grain of truth. What's this shadow in the victim's eyes?"

Shen Wei doesn't say a word.

Zhao Yunlan shoots him a smile, his eyes crinkling. "Hm?"

Shen Wei's gloomy face makes it clear that he doesn't appreciate the topic of Zhu Hong. He's silent for a few more seconds, then says somewhat coldly, "The soul was ripped from the body. If someone dies after their allotted time, and the reapers collect their soul, their eyes will be clear. But if their time was cut short, either by creatures of the Underworld or something in the living world, their eyes will retain a ghostly reflection."

"Hm...then what do you think this is?"

Shen Wei lowers his gaze and says quietly, "How would I know?"

"Hey, what's wrong? Are you unhappy? Jealous?" Zhao Yunlan is utterly shameless. "I like it when people are jealous. Come on, look at daddy again..."

Shen Wei is speechless.

"Before, you used to keep it in all day, like some Mr Perfect, ascended from the mortal plane. I'm tired of seeing you pretend,

even looking at that makes me feel exhausted on your behalf.” Zhao Yunlan casually sticks the note behind a lesson plan that Shen Wei has been drafting. “Come, Mr Perfect, there's a scanner beside the computer. Help me scan it and send it to the office so they can find out as much as possible before I go over there.”

Shen Wei takes the note over to the computer, only to then stand in front of it in a stupor. After turning it on, he starts a staring contest with the device in front of him—Mr Perfect actually only knows how to turn machines on and off and how to play PowerPoint presentations others have made for him. Everything else, his teaching assistant does for him; he can't even distinguish between a printer and a scanner.

Just then, Zhao Yunlan suddenly comes up behind him, reaching around him with both arms and taking his hand to guide the piece of paper into the scanner. Step by step, he operates it. Finally, covered by the noise of the machine, he deliberately breathes into Shen Wei's ear. “Hm, you don't know how to do it? If you don't know how to do it, why don't you ask your husband to teach you?”

Shen Wei doesn't know how to respond to that.

With a smirk, Zhao Yunlan quickly touches Shen Wei's butt. Before Shen Wei, face and ears flushed, can tackle him, he has already sidled far away to turn over a calendar sitting on the table. He taps on the email account and password written on the back. “You at least know how to do this, right? Go through the contacts and find the one that says ‘colleagues’, and send them the scanned picture.”

With that, the smile drops off his face. He quickly dials No. 4 Bright Avenue's number: “Wang Zheng? You're still awake, right? Thank you for staying late. Close the curtains a bit tighter—yes, I know something happened to Lin Jing. I sent you a picture; let everyone in the office take a look at it and see if you can figure out what it is. Ask

Lao Li to get two cars ready. We'll leave for the crime scene in half an hour.”

Right then, the lamp hanging from the ceiling suddenly swings back and forth; Dragon City is experiencing a mild earthquake. After it has passed, the sound of an email notification can be heard both over the phone and in the room at the same time.

Over the phone, Wang Zheng says, “Wait, Chief Zhao. There’s an email from Lin Jing.”

Next to the phone, Shen Wei turns around. “It seems the person you are looking for sent an email.”

Zhao Yunlan narrows his eyes and says to Wang Zheng, “Don’t hang up just yet.”

What Lin Jing has sent is a video of himself, taken with his mobile.

This selfie king, who’s always preening and taking pictures of himself, has superb camera skills. Usually, his hand is steady and the picture perfectly stable. But this video is constantly shaking, and Lin Jing is panting. The screen is rocking up and down; he’s either walking quickly or running.

He’s a little out of breath, but the sound of his gasping is very low. His hand is shaking badly. The screen is directly aimed at his face but when he opens his mouth, no sound comes out. With a frown, Zhao Yunlan deciphers his lips: “I...lost my voice...are...ear...I’m starting to lose my hearing... my fingers... no, it’s fingers, my fingers are stiffening and I have a bad feeling about this.”

After that, Lin Jing’s shaky hands move the camera away from his face to point directly at an upscale resort complex—the rehabilitation resort where the life force stealing case occurred.



On the surface, all the houses look beautiful, but as soon as Zhao Yunlan sees them, he feels a sense of dissonance.

At this point, the sound of Lin Jing's fingers tapping on the back cover of the mobile phone plays back in the video, very loud and grating. By contrast, the entire resort is deadly silent.

Lin Jing lifts a finger and writes out 'empty, nobody here' in front of the phone's camera. Zhao Yunlan notices that the second joint on his finger is a strange grey colour and stiff like stone; it can't bend at all.

Then, Lin Jing's fingers pause. He aims the camera at his face, points to his ears, and shakes his head with a solemn expression. He absently reaches for his prayer beads and closes his eyes. His lips are moving, and although he doesn't make any sound, it seems that he's reciting sutras to keep himself calm.

When he opens his eyes again, he looks stunned for a moment, and then narrows his eyes with seemingly great effort. After that, the camera shakes violently for a while until finally the video cuts off.

"At the end, it's likely he found he couldn't see clearly anymore and so quickly sent the video," Zhao Yunlan determines. "Maybe because of his failing vision, he clicked the wrong thing and sent a timed email, that's why we only saw it now, or..."

"Or for whatever reason, the email couldn't be sent," Shen Wei continues.

Zhao Yunlan turns his head and their gazes connect. A moment later, they both say, "The earthquake just now."

Right as they've said it, the faint tremors come again, like an ordinary aftershock. Then there are sounds in the corridor: footsteps and voices. Zhao Yunlan lives relatively high up, so perhaps the

shaking is stronger on higher floors and people are running out in a panic.

Zhao Yunlan has experienced earthquakes before. He stands where he is, unmoving. “Don’t you think this ‘earthquake’ is a bit strange? When the Earth’s crust is moving, it usually causes more of a swaying motion...this feels more like shaking.”

Shen Wei lowers his eyes and carefully listens to his senses. “It seems to be movement from the Underworld.”

“The Underworld?”

Shen Wei’s expression turns grave. Zhao Yunlan considers for a moment, then squats down and makes sure his gun is fully loaded with special bullets. He puts a dagger engraved with incantations into his ankle holster. Then he carelessly crams all the money from his wallet into his pockets, and fills the now empty wallet with a thick pile of talismans.

Finally, he takes a piece of wood out of his drawer. This is the real Guardian Order Token, actual bark cut from the trunk of the Holy Tree. When the words ‘Guardian Order’ on the bark touch Zhao Yunlan’s fingers, they burst into a series of dazzling sparks.

He pockets the Guardian Order Token and says decisively, “Let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later, they arrive at No. 4 Bright Ave. Another while later, two off-road vehicles leave the yard at the same time, heading directly towards the place where Lin Jing had his accident.

It’s less than 300 kilometres from Dragon City to the crime scene, about four hours on the highway. The place has no local industry, but there are mountains and hot springs; it’s a typical little wellness tourism town. The natural villages in the surrounding area have been

relocated for the sake of a beautiful environment. The only people who come through here every day are buyers and service personnel.

The town is as quiet as a ghost town. A produce truck is parked haphazardly on the side of the road at the edge of town, inside it a full load of fresh vegetables. Not a single thing is missing, but the driver's door is open and there's no one inside.

"A lot of service personnel must come here from the surrounding small towns and villages every day," Zhao Yunlan says. "Xiao Guo, get over there and drive the truck to the police station in town. Ask our colleagues there if they've received any reports of missing people in recent days."

Guo Changcheng is stunned. He's keenly aware of the strangeness of this town. Even just standing here, his legs are shaking non-stop. It's obvious that Zhao Yunlan is letting him go in order to protect him. At first this makes Guo Changcheng breathe a sigh of relief, but then for some unknown reason he feels his heart beat higher in his throat.

"Let Zhu Hong go with you," Zhao Yunlan says.

Zhu Hong isn't a random whipping-boy like Xiao Guo and protests immediately. "No! I'm not going anywhere!"

Zhao Yunlan takes out a cigarette and holds it in his mouth. He doesn't spare her a glance: "What, you haven't officially resigned yet but my words are already useless?"

"I..."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't give her a chance to argue, only gets back in the car and closes the door. "Lao Chu, come sit over here."

Zhu Hong stands frozen in place, glaring angrily at Zhao Yunlan.

Before getting into the car, Chu Shuzhi nudges her shoulder gently. “Hurry up and go, Chief Zhao’s orders make sense. There's not much you can do to help here, but Xiao Guo over there isn’t all that great at talking, so go help him out.”

Zhu Hong doesn't even have time to reply. Zhao Yunlan, that bastard, has already floored the accelerator and driven away.

## Chapter 97

“Bastard!” Zhu Hong bends down to pick up a stone from the ground. This snake demon is certainly no soft lady; her arm strength is amazing and she’s very good at smashing things, being steady, accurate, and ruthless about it. With a ‘bang’ she hits the boot of the official car, and a piece of coating very obviously comes off it.

Zhao Yunlan doesn’t even care, let alone stop the car.

Just then, the phone in Zhu Hong’s pocket pings. She takes it out and sees a text from Chu Shuzhi: ‘Chief Zhao says to tell you that the money for destroying public property will come out of your bonus this month. Once your bonus is gone, we’ll take it out of your salary. So take it easy, before you don’t have a single cent to take with you when you resign.’

Zhu Hong squeezes the edges of her phone in her hand and roars, “Zhao Yunlan, you dickhead!”

Guo Changcheng’s face is ashen as he watches this defiant behaviour. That a coworker would dare to clash with a superior terrifies his fragile little heart.

Zhu Hong turns to glare at him with reddened eyes. “What are you looking at? Hurry up and get going!”

Guo Changcheng scuttles after her.

Zhu Hong rages, “Are you a man at all? If you’re a man, drive! Have you ever seen a man who makes a woman drive?!”

Guo Changcheng blinks at her and realises she’s taking her anger out on him. Driving a beat-up car isn’t like going to a public bathroom

with male and female sections. Besides, Zhu Hong isn't human, so Guo Changcheng isn't particularly afraid of her. He says bluntly, "Zhu-jie, you actually aren't a woman eith—"

Zhu Hong's face goes very still, like a King Cobra about to give a deadly strike, almost flicking her forked tongue. Sensing danger, Guo Changcheng dives into the car without making a sound.

However, Zhu Hong doesn't get into the car herself. She slams the passenger side door and waves at Guo Changcheng: "Fuck off by yourself, I'm going to find Zhao Yunlan."

Before Guo Changcheng can figure out what's going on, she has already disappeared.

~~~

Sitting in Zhao Yunlan's car, Da Qing and Chu Shuzhi are also suffering. The front passenger is a great God who looks vastly different from his past appearance. Knowing that he's the Ghost Slayer, both the Zombie King and the old cat have trouble going back to their innocent days of acting shamelessly towards everyone.

They drive in awkward silence all the way to the main entrance of the little resort town.

A marble sign with the words 'Spring Bay Holiday Resort' sculpted in large letters rises imposingly from an exuberant bed of flowers. Whether due to the material or to the weather, the words carved into the stone seem very bleak.

There are two security booths and two roads leading into town, but both entrances are barred. On the side, there's a card reader for residents to open the gates automatically, but it doesn't light up. It seems there's no power.

Zhao Yunlan parks the car at the entrance, then checks his phone. There's only a very faint signal, so tiny that it might as well not be there. After he shakes his phone a little, the signal is gone completely.

The window of the security booth is open, a small parcel sitting on the windowsill. There's a notebook beside it with an uncapped pen on top.

Both windowsill and objects are covered in a strange layer of grey dust.

Zhao Yunlan puts on his gloves and picks up the notebook for a closer look. He finds it's a record of courier deliveries: packages are accepted and signed by the doorman on behalf of the recipient, to later be countersigned by the recipient himself.

The date of the last entry happens to be that of the previous day, and reads "10A, owner Mr. Li, bag..."

The word "bag" is incomplete; the hook at the end of the last character is missing as it comes to an abrupt end.

Zhao Yunlan closes his eyes and imagines the scene: the delivery man passes the package in through the window, then takes the sign-in sheet and writes down the information, until he's suddenly interrupted before he can finish the word "bag".

Interrupted by what?

The item is still there. Where has the man gone?

Just then, Shen Wei comes over and wipes some of that fine, strangely colored dust off the windowsill.

He rubs his fingers together, carefully observing for a moment, then says lightly to Zhao Yunlan, "It has not been long since it settled."

Zhao Yunlan is ready to kneel to this expert who can analyse traces of dust with the naked eye: “Dust settling? You can tell just like that? How do you do it?”

Shen Wei pats his hands clean. “I cannot tell with other kinds of dust, but this is bone dust. It has not settled for very long, it is still fresh. I don’t think it could have been here longer than two or three days.”

Zhao Yunlan is speechless.

Shen Wei’s tone is just as if he were saying, ‘This milk is fresh, straight from the cow’.

Stupefied, Zhao Yunlan closes the notebook and fishes out an evidence bag to put it in. He’s very glad that he sent Guo Changcheng away, because that guy would be scared enough to pee himself and attack indiscriminately with his anti-ghost electric stick.

“What did you call it? Bone dust? Like ashes? It doesn’t look like that.” Zhao Yunlan subconsciously thinks of ashes packed into an urn after cremation, and is sceptical for a moment.

Shen Wei explains patiently, “Those are not the kind of ashes that have been burnt. You know what ‘ground to dust’²¹³ means, don’t you? The man could have been standing right here, and then his flesh would have disintegrated in a moment, and his bones pulverised, landing on the windowsill.”

Chu Shuzhi, who has also come over at some point, asks incredulously: “What about that person’s flesh and blood?”

“Evaporated.” Shen Wei pushes up his glasses, “Flesh and blood don’t have the resilience of bone. It’s very difficult for those to leave any traces.”

Chu Shuzhi says carefully, "Hearing this, it seems that Your Honour knows how the people here disappeared, right?"

Shen Wei nods politely, and modestly says, "I don't know much, but I do indeed happen to know a bit about this."

And then, to his audience of two people and a cat, he intones evenly as if passing on common knowledge about an everyday occurrence, "During the times of great chaos, after Gonggong knocked down Mount Buzhou, the skies shattered and the earth cracked. When the Ghost tribe came up to the surface for the first time, people and animals within a 5km radius were instantly turned into bone dust. Within 50km, not a single blade of grass would grow."

He raises his hand to point below the marble signboard of the resort, at the flower bed still flourishing in the middle of winter. "So the flowers over there are probably all fake."

"But this small resort town isn't even 5km across," Zhao Yunlan points out. "There are two big pine trees at the main gate over there, and those are definitely not 50km away..."

"Because of that."

Their gazes follow Shen Wei's finger, and see a small flower garden at the entrance to the town. A venue surrounds the garden on all sides, split into many small buildings of various heights that delicately encircle the garden like a wall, providing privacy for the owner inside.

"The pond in the middle has the shape of a flower petal. The water flows in all four directions, perfectly connecting the small buildings." Chu Shuzhi is very arrogant, but right now there's no trace of his usual attitude as he humbly asks, "May I ask, Your Honour... That is a five-to-five plum blossom array²¹⁴, right?"

“Yes. You’re very knowledgeable, Mr. Chu—the plum blossom array is used to protect the home from evil spirits and ensure its safety,” Shen Wei says. “The dark energy was blocked by the array, it couldn’t get out. The only unprotected area is this small section of the road by the entrance. However, if this crude plum blossom array was able to suppress the energy surge, I think the Houtu Great Seal is probably all right. There just happened to be a small gap here. Once it’s patched up, it should be fine.”

Chu Shuzhi and Da Qing don’t know what the Houtu Great Seal is exactly, but hearing Shen Wei talk, they feel that it’s like a question of a button falling off and merely needing to be sewn back on.

Zhao Yunlan can’t help but look at him. At first glance, Shen Wei seems like a person with well-defined boundaries, never stepping out of line; but in reality, there’s not a single line he wouldn’t cross.

Zhao Yunlan understands that Shen Wei has already got what he wanted. He’s probably very relaxed now and doesn’t care about the Houtu Great Seal at all. Zhao Yunlan suspects he doesn’t even care about his own life or death.

“No wonder the Underworld is making such a big commotion. They’re in complete disarray now, right?” Shen Wei can’t help smirking, but then he senses that gloating so openly is rude; he drops his smile immediately and coughs lightly. “No matter; just follow me closely.”

Chu Shuzhi and Da Qing immediately abandon their leader, deciding to cling to the leg of this promising ‘leader’s wife’ instead.

Zhao Yunlan says nothing, just follows silently, unable to shake an ominous premonition. To borrow a life...he was out of it when he passed the problem to Lin Jing and didn’t have time to consider it in detail. Now he thinks of it, doesn’t this perfectly match up to the Sundial of Reincarnation case from before?

But the problem is, the Sundial of Reincarnation... is in the Ghost Face's hands.

The Great Seal is weak; it may be able to control the majority of the ghost tribe, but it has already failed to contain the Ghost King for thousands of years. Three of the Four Mystical Artefacts have already appeared. All except the Sundial of Reincarnation are actually in the possession of Zhao Yunlan and his people. However, the four pillars are like four legs—you don't have to lift all four together. You merely have to saw off two of them, and the Seal will topple.

Who knows what that elusive²¹⁵ Lantern of the Guardian really is?

As they walk in from the pedestrian access road next to the main gate, an intense, sickening smell assaults their senses. Even in Shen Wei's shadow, Da Qing can't stop his fur from bristling. The Guardian Whip quietly slips down Zhao Yunlan's arm, a little tip of it sticking out at his wrist; his other hand touches the small dagger hidden in his sleeve.

To Zhao Yunlan's eyes, the hot spring resort town in front of them is more like a trap. Lin Jing's video did not, in fact, film him going inside. Given Lin Jing's cautious nature, he'd never have gone in by himself under such bad conditions without contacting headquarters.

Something must have misled him or... forced him by making him lose his five senses, and his sixth sense too, before he even had time to step into this part of the town.

Even if Lin Jing were a direct descendant of Buddha, he still wouldn't have been able to fend off the intense air of resentment that came up from the Underworld when the Great Seal cracked open. Wouldn't it have been easier to kill him outright?

Keeping him alive... was it to lure someone here?

The Guardian Order or Shen Wei?

The tastefully sculpted pathways are empty; all the strangely-shaped houses are empty, not even a single shadow of a ghost. But at some point, Shen Wei's black robe materialises on his body. He probably felt something, and now his hand is clasping the Soul Slashing Blade.

The footsteps of the three people and the cat make eerie echoes, far and wide.

Gradually, the sinking sun has turned from a warm orange to a dull blood red... just like the creepy red cinnabar circles painted on the faces of paper servants that can be found in mourning shops²¹⁶.

It makes everyone throw amazingly long, dark shadows.

Just then, Zhao Yunlan suddenly stretches a leg to kick aside the black cat by his feet. At the same time, he takes a big step forward, and without time to turn around, brings the dagger up behind his back. A teeth-aching sound rings out as the demon beast collides with the blade and loses several teeth while the iron blade cracks from the impact.

Immediately, Zhao Yunlan pivots on one foot to slash at the demon beast again... when it suddenly looks terrified and its entire hideous body is sucked into the centre of Shen Wei's palm, like an ugly balloon with the air let out.

Countless bells start ringing in the distance, all at the same time. A layer of black fog rises up two feet high from the spotlessly clean pavement of the little town. The black cat lets out a high-pitched scream and dashes up onto Zhao Yunlan's shoulder: pustule-covered hands reach up from the ground!

A demon beast must have climbed onto the roof at some point, and just like those zombies that suddenly appear behind someone in the

movies, it jumps down from the roof in a whoosh. With its giant claw, it grabs Chu Shuzhi's head and opens its mouth to bite down. Chu Shuzhi's thin hand becomes stiff as stone in an instant, and he shoves it viciously into the demon beast's throat. The demon beast stumbles backwards a few steps and falls to the ground. Even before it's dead, countless even more strangely shaped ghosts pounce on it and devour it, flesh and bones and all.

The Ghost tribe is crawling out from the ground in infinite numbers, revolting and nauseating.

Shen Wei's eyelids twitch for a moment. Born to the Ghost tribe himself, he holds a deep-rooted hatred for his fellow tribe members... and these ones even dare appear in front of Zhao Yunlan!

With a 'zing', he draws the Soul Slashing Blade. Zhao Yunlan, catching sight of it from the corner of his eye, says, "Shen Wei, slow down, this isn't—"

But it's already too late. The Soul Slashing Blade lengthens until it's several metres long; it effortlessly sweeps through countless ghosts, instantly disintegrating them. His eyes cold, Shen Wei flicks his wrist and his blade crashes down with unstoppable force. Across the whole town, the thick black fog is blown away. Then, his blade falls on the ground, leaving a long, narrow gash dozens of metres deep. An inhuman scream rings out to the ends of the earth, and he stares fiercely down the crack. "Come out."

He was so quick and destructive that Zhao Yunlan, who was only five steps away from him, can only now grasp his arm and finish what he meant to say. "This isn't a break in the Great Seal. I suspect it's only an altered Shadow Blitz. Don't act rashly!"

Shrill laughter suddenly breaks out all around. "Yes, it's a shame that the Lord Guardian's brain and mouth aren't as fast as the Lord Ghost Slayer's blade."

The gash Shen Wei tore into the ground cracks open wider, splitting the earth. Shen Wei drags Zhao Yunlan into his arms, while Chu Shuzhi and Da Qing have ended up on the other side.

The rift grows larger and larger, as if earth itself were turning somersaults. In the blink of an eye, those on the two different sides have lost sight of each other.

Shen Wei suddenly groans under his breath, tightly clutching Zhao Yunlan's hand as though something is violently pulling him away. A swirl of black energy has entangled his arm like a sticky cobweb.

Chapter 98

On Guo Changcheng's mobile phone, the last text message Chu Shuzhi has sent him tells him not to come to the resort town no matter what and, even more importantly, to stop others from going there.

By the time Guo Changcheng has thought of going back to ask how to achieve the simple-sounding goal of 'stopping others from going', and to report that Zhu Hong has run away while he's at it, he finds that Chu Shuzhi's phone is no longer reachable.

Suddenly he feels that everyone in the world has disappeared, leaving him alone and helpless. He doesn't know how long he sits at the roadside in his parked car before he summons the courage to follow the GPS to the nearest town, heading straight to the local police bureau.

From far away, he can already see a large crowd in front of the police station, blocking the intersection. Guo Changcheng honks his horn, but nobody pays him any attention. Just as he's about to open the car door, he sees an old, white-haired woman being helped out of the station. Her lower limbs seem to have lost their dexterity; two people are bracing her on her left and right, and a girl in a police uniform behind her also often reaches out to help. Despite this, she still trips over some object and stumbles, only to fall right onto the bonnet of Guo Changcheng's car.

Guo Changcheng rushes out of the car. The old woman's relatives and friends, the passers-by, and the police who followed her out are all scrambling to pull her back up.

But the woman suddenly bursts into tears, heedless of the crowd.

All the people around join in the commotion. Guo Changcheng hears someone whisper angrily, “I don’t know what the police are doing nowadays. They don’t care about anything, and nothing gets solved. What’s our country paying them for?”

Another person whispers back, “Right, look how pitiful this old woman is. Her husband’s dead, and she only has this one son. They depend on each other for survival. If something happens to him, I think she probably won’t live long either.”

This hits the old woman’s sore spot and she starts crying even more hysterically.

The young policewoman who has been following behind her the whole time looks about the same age as Guo Changcheng—almost a child, just recently graduated. When she sees everyone looking at her, she feels so embarrassed, she doesn’t know what to do. Blushing, she mumbles, “We have regulations here, we have to wait 48 hours before we can...”

Her voice is quickly drowned out by the others.

“What do you mean, 48 hours? Rules are dead but people are alive! Right now, the person is alive but what if he isn’t anymore in a few days? If something really is wrong, it’ll be too late by then! The body’s already cold and you guys still don’t care? Hey, girl, you tell me: what’s the difference between you guys and murderers who kill for profit?”

The young policewoman listens and thinks they have a good point, but the police force is limited and rules are rules. No matter how reasonable she thinks people are, she can’t ignore the regulations. She’s anxious and her eyes turn red, tears about to fall.

A middle-aged man, another family member come to report a case, waves his hand. “Enough! Even if she wanted to, she wouldn’t be able to help. Everybody stop pressuring her. Miss, let me tell you, my

younger sister was supposed to leave work yesterday but she never came home. She's about the same age as you; put yourself in her shoes: this young lady is usually very obedient, and then suddenly, for no reason, she doesn't come home at night, and we can't get in contact with her. We're her family, of course we're worried! If this happened to you, what would your parents and family think? I know this is hard on you. How about you help us go talk to your chief, ok? Help us get our point across..."

Watching the scene, Guo Changcheng develops a splitting headache. Slowly gathering the courage to speak in front of such a big crowd, he listens closely to the people talking next to him. They're saying all sorts of things, their descriptions chaotic. Some only keep going 'My XX didn't come home yesterday'—if he didn't know better, he'd assume they just gathered here deliberately to cause trouble.

Just then, the old woman still sprawled crying on top of his car suddenly faints, her eyes rolling back into her head. Instantly, Guo Changcheng finds his courage and pushes through the people in front of him. "Let me through, excuse me, let me through, everyone."

He pulls out his staff ID and his car keys and, in his excitement, throws the ID directly at one of the old woman's relatives. "Drive my car. Take her to the hospital!"

The person holds up the small card. "Huh?"

Guo Changcheng looks over. "Oh, sorry, wrong one. It's this one here."

He quickly exchanges the ID for his keys and hands the ID to the policewoman. "Comrade, can you take me to see your chief? It's urgent business."

The policewoman gives him a confused look, and then her eyes widen: "You... are you the Chief from Dragon City?"

“No, no, I’m not the Chief. We sent someone to investigate a homicide two days ago. The relevant procedures have already been completed and submitted to you. But yesterday that colleague disappeared, and our Chief is at the crime scene right now. He sent me here to give you a heads-up.” He wipes his forehead, which has become sweaty even in the dead of winter. With better composure than expected, he says, “Is everyone here to report a crime? Are they all disappearance cases?”

Many people nod.

“Oh...oh...then how did the people disappear?”

That question is like poking a hornet’s nest. All of a sudden, everyone begins clamouring at once, like five thousand ducks all quacking together, noisy enough to make Guo Changcheng feel dizzy, as if his blood sugar were dropping. He steadies his nerves and pats his pants pocket, worried that his social phobia might make the electric rod in his pocket emit 100,000 volts and accidentally hurt innocent people.

However, to his surprise, he isn’t as afraid as he thought he would be.

Whenever he asks others for help or asks questions, he always feels that he’s a big annoyance who doesn’t understand anything. By nature, he fears other people and fears having to communicate or make eye contact. But when he realises the person in front of him is the one needing help, he can be surprisingly smooth.

With a flash of inspiration, he suddenly waves to interrupt the noise of the crowd. “I can’t hear what you’re saying. I’ll ask a question and you raise your hands to answer, okay? May I ask if your lost friends and relatives worked at the small hot spring resort town? If that’s the case, could you raise your hand?”

With a whoosh, everyone raises their hands. The eyes of the policewoman next to Guo Changcheng widen. Earlier, everybody's arguing just buzzed in her ears and she was only concerned about how long after an adult's disappearance a case could be filed. She didn't realise it might be a serious incident involving a wide range of people.

Guo Changcheng is starting to get a clearer picture. He goes on, "If you're sure that your friends and relatives went missing in the resort town, keep your hands raised. If you can't confirm it, lower your hand for now, ok?"

A few hands waver and go down. After a moment, they hesitantly come up again.

The middle-aged man from before says, "Chief, can I say something?"

Guo Changcheng: "I'm not the Chief... oh, whatever, please speak."

"My little sister works as a waitress in the town hall cafeteria. She didn't come home yesterday evening. That's not something that's ever happened before, so everyone in the family was extremely anxious. In the middle of the night, my dad, my brother, and my sister's partner went out together and looked for her along the road to her work. But later those three also disappeared and I couldn't contact them by phone. After I got up this morning, I came right here to report it." The man's eyes are still bloodshot. He does his best to keep his voice steady, trying to be as calm as possible. "Chief, think about it. If it's just a young girl, that's one thing, but what could possibly happen to three adult men together? I think it must've been something big."

His judgement is very accurate; practically spot-on. Although Guo Changcheng is out of his depth, he knows that everything the man said is correct.

When the others hear this, they get even more upset. With their loved ones gone missing, they were already like cats on hot bricks, and now they all try to squeeze in front of Guo Changcheng to say a few extra words about their family members. They all want to talk to this young man; he might look wet behind the ears, but to them, he's a saviour.

If they only wanted to have a discussion, that wouldn't be a problem, but some people start pushing others, and a woman carrying a child falls down. The toddler starts wailing loudly. Some people shout, "Don't push, we're all worried here!" and others scream, "Watch the child! Don't step on the child!"

It's incredibly chaotic.

Guo Changcheng is seeing stars. If only Zhu Hong would come... if only Chief Zhao would come!

He squeezes his mobile and thinks of the task Chu Shuzhi has given him. He can't go back. Moreover, he can't allow these people to act rashly... but they did lose their loved ones; who can stay calm under these circumstances?

Guo Changcheng's mind goes blank.

What should he do? They trust him so much, allowing him to take care of this task. This is also the first time since his induction over half a year ago that he's undertaking a duty on his own. How could he dare fail them and screw things up?

If it were Chief Zhao, what would he do? If it were Chu-ge?

He can't let anyone go over there, it's too dangerous. He steps forward suddenly, standing on the curb. "Everyone! Everyone!"

The crowd quietens down.

Guo Changcheng holds up his staff ID. "I'm here from Dragon City's Special Investigations Unit. We specifically handle major cases. Earlier, our Chief took all the elite staff members to the scene of the crime and sent me over here to explain the situation clearly to everyone. Although we haven't found news of your loved ones, there also isn't any bad news. Our people are already expending all their efforts on the search. The best you can do now is to help the comrades here at the local police station to coordinate well and report relevant information. Absolutely do not get close to the crime scene! If you did, it would bring trouble to the search and rescue team, and wouldn't help us find the missing persons."

He's never said this much in one breath before, but in this moment, he feels that he isn't fighting alone. There's a fire burning inside of him.

He brings his hands together and, with a palm-fist salute, bows to everyone in a circle. "I thank you all, and promise that we'll do everything in our power. Right now, can I ask everyone to line up and go inside with me to register?"

The crowd stands there, people looking at each other in consternation for a while. Then, they actually line up in silence. A few minutes later, the young policewoman leads them inside in an orderly fashion.

Now it's Guo Changcheng who stands there in a daze. For a moment, he can't believe what he has just accomplished.

~~~

Meanwhile, the others don't have it as easy as Guo Changcheng. Shen Wei, entangled by the black shadow, has relapsed into stubbornness and refuses to let go of Zhao Yunlan no matter what. He holds the back of the Soul Slashing Blade in his teeth, its icy cold reflection making the corners of his already bloodless lips seem even

whiter. Turning his head, he aims the blade at the black shadow trapping him.

Zhao Yunlan snatches the blade from his mouth. “Gimme.”

Using this matchless blade, he fiercely slashes at the black energy wrapped around Shen Wei’s arms. But it’s like glue, and the sharp blade can only force it apart slightly – it’s too sticky to be cut.

Shen Wei holds Zhao Yunlan tighter, glances over and says quickly, “I understand now. That thing is The Profane Land itself; the only thing the Soul Slashing Blade cannot cut. You can’t do it like this. Quick, cut off my arm!”

Being a mortal, Zhao Yunlan can’t understand this great God who can cut off his arms, legs and head with ease, so he ignores him. He thrusts the Soul Slashing Blade back into the scabbard, then retrieves a Guardian Order Token. With a snap of his fingers, a small flame spurts out. The Guardian Order Token, carrying the flame along, dives straight into the black shadow...

...and vanishes. Not even a bit of ash remains.

In the past, Shen Wei has spoken to him softly, but this time, uncharacteristically, he raises his voice. “Cut off my arm before it’s too late!”

Zhao Yunlan turns a deaf ear. He immediately takes out the original Guardian Order Token from his pocket, the real deal carved from the Holy Tree that he purposefully brought along. Shen Wei is shocked. “Isn’t that—”

But this time, it’s Zhao Yunlan who acts faster than he can blink. Before Shen Wei finishes speaking, the Guardian Order Token from the Holy Tree is already burning with a flame about a foot high and abnormally red. The black fog entangling Shen Wei’s arms finally withdraws a little in fear.

Shen Wei pulls back his arm, and the first thing he does is pluck back the half-burned Guardian Order Token. With Zhao Yunlan in his arms, he dodges away from the fog. Then, out of nowhere, he condenses a pool of clear water in his palm and douses the Guardian Order Token.

The word 'Guardian' is already half burned away<sup>217</sup>, and the line 'guard the souls of the living, pacify the hearts of the dead' on the back has long since disappeared.

The two of them quickly start running away. Even through all their evasive manoeuvres, Shen Wei's frown stays firmly in place. Carefully wiping ash off the Guardian Order Token, he scowls at Zhao Yunlan. "Do you even know that you weren't originally allowed to enter the wheel of reincarnation? That being the Guardian, the Guardian Order Token is your protective talisman? This was carved from the Holy Tree. In a crisis, it would protect you and save your life without any difficulty. You—"

It turns out that even if his upright-gentleman façade was mostly pretend, this trait is real: Shen Wei is really bad at swearing. Ultimately, he has to settle for the next best thing and blurts, "You, you're a total loser!"

The darkness pursues them relentlessly, thick as indelible ink. This time it hasn't been summoned by Shadow Blitz. It's the real deal. Wherever it passes, it leaves nothing behind—absolutely nothing, like it can even swallow up the void. This is real chaos. The two of them, who've always run roughshod over others, never imagined they'd cut such sorry figures now, running for their lives.

In this life-and-death situation, Zhao Yunlan still takes the time to roll his eyes at Shen Wei. "Oh shove off! You just cut off your arms and dig out your heart at every opportunity. Do you think you're a gecko? Looks to me like you're the loser."

Shen Wei suddenly realises that his company must be rubbing off on him. He's still in the mood to bicker with Zhao Yunlan even at a time like this, stupidly and quite unlike himself. He immediately closes his mouth. He puts his arms around Zhao Yunlan, the Ghost Slayer's huge black cloak billowing into the sky like a black cloud. His feet leave the ground and, with Zhao Yunlan in his arms, he leaps forward close to a hundred metres before he touches down again lightly. Then he plummets directly into the rift in the earth, dodging the fissure's many jagged edges, as swift as a pitch-black swallow.

The ground shakes yet again.

In a flash, a large group of ghost messengers, always late at the critical moment, burst out from deeper below. Tragically, before they can grasp the situation, the indestructible black shadow swallows half of them right as they surface.

The judge shrieks and curls into a big ball, trying to go back into the ground without a word. However, Ox-Head and Horse-Face yank him back out like a radish. "Your Honor, it's useless. Underground isn't a good hiding place."

Another ragtag group of strange looking Underworld messengers join his troupe in their efforts to flee, only adding to the disgraceful mess.

By now, Shen Wei and Zhao Yunlan have finally put a decent distance between them and the black fog. Abruptly, Shen Wei leaps out of the fissure and forcefully pushes Zhao Yunlan forward. Zhao Yunlan gets it at once, and, using that strength, jumps about ten metres far. He catches himself against the ground with his hands, and quickly gets back on his feet, his stance firm.

Shen Wei is already in midair, making a gesture with his hands, silently reciting an incantation from a distant time and space. The black shadow is approaching slowly. When it's almost close enough



to touch the edge of his cloak, a piercing white light bursts out of Shen Wei's hand.

The timing is perfect.

The black shadow swirls to a halt right in front of Shen Wei. It suddenly shudders, then it's slowly being pulled in by that white light.

Everyone holds their breath.

Within five minutes, the overpowering black shadow has been absorbed by the increasingly bright light. Cold sweat is running down Shen Wei's face and along his jaw. The judge slumps down to the ground. Zhao Yunlan lets out a breath and slowly relaxes his fist - it was clenched so hard there are fingernail imprints on his palm.

The glaring white light begins to return into Shen Wei's hands. Everything seems to have settled down.

Suddenly, things change.

Without warning, a silhouette appears behind Shen Wei, ripping apart the air. The Ghost Face, who has been lying in ambush for who knows how long, stabs a yard-long icicle into Shen Wei's back, directly into his heart.

## Chapter 99

Before the judge and his retinue can even recover from this sudden incident, they see a long whip curl towards the Ghost Face like a venomous snake. The Guardian Whip wraps around the Ghost Face's neck with absolute precision.

The slash of the whip has triggered a fierce wind that stings everyone's face. The bystanding ghost messengers feel a collective slap across the face, burning painfully, and they turn to flee as one.

Bile is rising in the judge's throat, he can barely hold it in—it has become impossible to ignore the disturbance to the Great Seal, but it seems like all those with authority have chosen to turn away.

Everyone ranking high enough to know the ancient secrets of the Great Seal is now either a millennia-old demon and head of his tribe, or has cultivated through countless challenges and become immortal.

Five hundred years ago when the Great Seal first showed signs of weakening, the Underworld brought all the forces together in one place to jointly discuss the issue. At the time, hundreds of voices responded to their call. The various immortals were enthusiastic, each and every one of them extolling justice. They wouldn't shut up about the commoners and the mortal realm, all promising that they could be counted on and wouldn't give up even if they were to die ten thousand deaths.

But ever since the Battle of Mount Kunlun, they all must have conspired to go missing.

They were all experienced cultivators, and they all knew it wasn't something particularly impressive or promising for the future.

Cultivation is an incredibly long process, where one must experience hardship that others can't imagine and loneliness that bystanders can't understand. The natural-born traits of the person must be good, they must already be rare and unique, with a persistent mind, and they must walk alone on that path. They mustn't be impatient to achieve small successes or be prone to giving up halfway. They're one in a million. Added to that, regardless of how good their natural qualities are, regardless of how hard they strive, if they're missing a little bit of luck, they'll still fail in the end.

Who wouldn't show off their feathers as a result of this cultivation, when they've been through so much hardship?

If it weren't for the Great Seal being damaged and the Underworld needing to step forward because they'd feel the impact first—the judge silently examines his conscience and concludes he'd have stayed out of this as much as he could. Not to mention that he's just a lowly judge. The Kings of the Underworld might have dared to play many little tricks that were beneath the Ghost Slayer's notice, but if they did go too far, which one of them would have the guts to step forward and face this Ghost King directly?

Not to mention that strange, moody Ghost Face.

The judge can't make up his mind, and his eyes fall on Zhao Yunlan—only true natural-born gods and demons from primordial times had that kind of skill, and the kind of mindset where they didn't care if they died.

Even if he's just a mortal now, he still dares strangle a Ghost King with his whip.

The judge feels uneasy. He doesn't understand such desperate passion, and can't imagine that kind of insistence, throwing himself into the breach while everyone else is fleeing. Least of all can he grasp that pioneering spirit born from a fearless past.

Kunlun has long since disappeared into the cycle of reincarnation, and now this man in front of him is clearly just a glib-tongued mortal. How dare he not be fearful and terrified? After having lost the authority and power of the Primordial Mountain God, could he just be relying on his soul that was cleansed and cultivated through countless reincarnations?

At last, Shen Wei closes his hands into fists and the white light disappears, the dark chaos completely engulfed within. Suddenly his body convulses violently; black threads like spider silk burst from the icicle piercing his chest and, in the blink of an eye, wrap him up in a giant cocoon.

The Ghost Face is clutching the end of the icicle in one hand, and he's managed to bring up his other hand to protect his throat before the Guardian Whip wrapped around his neck.

Hovering in the air, he meets eyes with the mortal standing far below him. The fire in that man's eyes burns hotter than the soul fire that ignited the entire Profane Lands.

"If the Guardian Order wasn't compromised..." The Ghost Face's voice sounds hoarse and thready under Zhao Yunlan's attempt to strangle him. "...perhaps my neck would already have lost a layer of skin by now. Tch, what a shame..."

Zhao Yunlan grits out one sentence through his teeth: "Let. Him. Go."

The Ghost Face looks at him blankly. "He and I are both Ghost Kings. Despite our differences in circumstances and personalities, I don't wish to hurt him. It's he who forced me into a dead end step by step. You want him, you can have him - in exchange for the Lantern of the Guardian."

Zhao Yunlan turns a deaf ear to any suggestion of a hostage swap. But his handsome face darkens. "Then let me advise you. If you're

smart, stab me with an icicle too, or I'll make sure you'll never attain reincarnation for eternity."

The Ghost Face listens, falls silent for a moment, then bursts into loud laughter. "If you were Kunlun, I'd certainly not let you get away alive even at the cost of my own life. As it is..."

His body shudders violently, and the Guardian Whip, having lost the Holy Tree's protection, shatters into countless segments, slashing Zhao Yunlan's palm almost to the bone. "Ah, my Lord Guardian..." the Ghost Face sighs. "I'm grateful that you let me borrow your light, and I've also been influenced by him. I can't help it... I do actually like you a little bit; it wouldn't hurt to keep you around."

As the Ghost Face finishes talking, a black fog rises along with the sound of his shrill laughter. Suddenly he and Shen Wei, who's still wrapped in the black cocoon, simultaneously vanish without a trace.

Zhao Yunlan stands in the same place for a long while, his hand covered in blood. The judge finally can't help clearing his throat: "Lord Guardian..."

The sound of his voice startles Zhao Yunlan back to reality. He slowly raises his head to look at him, the corners of his eyes a disturbing shade of red, and his pupils terrifyingly black. He raises his hand to gently lick the wound on his palm, his eyes brooding and deeply shadowed.

The judge shivers instinctively.

"I need to trouble you with something, judge," Zhao Yunlan says in a strangely calm tone. "Please take me to the Underworld to see the real Wheel of Reincarnation."

For a moment, the judge thinks that there's something quite alien about him. After a long while, he says incongruously, "This humble

one thought the Lord would want to ask about the Lantern of the Guardian...”

“The Lantern of the Guardian?” Zhao Yunlan’s eyebrow twitches slightly. The fingers of his left hand are unconsciously pressing down on the wound in his right hand, but his fingertips quickly turn bright red. That whole time, the judge is terrified that Zhao Yunlan will say something frightening, but Zhao Yunlan only continues to be strangely calm, his eyelids drooping until they don’t even reveal a little slit. Then he says simply, “Please lead the way.”

“Chief Zhao!” a woman’s voice suddenly rings out behind them. Zhao Yunlan doesn’t need to turn around to know that it’s Zhu Hong.

“Yeah.” Zhao Yunlan doesn’t lose his temper, or have any particular reaction at all. He just answers casually, as if he has forgotten that he sent Zhu Hong away and she disobeyed his command by coming back. He briefly stops walking. “If you bump into Chu Shuzhi and Da Qing, tell them to continue to look for Lin Jing. I have something to attend to, I’ll be gone for a bit.”

“I’ll go with you!” Zhu Hong says.

Zhao Yunlan looks at her blankly. “No need. Taking you along would be inconvenient. Cultivate a couple more years, little snake.”

Zhu Hong is seething. “Little snake? I’m a little snake? Then what are you? Those of your age in our tribe would still be gnawing on their own eggshells! You’re just a mortal!”

Zhao Yunlan doesn’t even turn his head, only the corners draw up silently in a cold smile. So quietly that his words are barely audible, he replies, “There’s no rush; soon I won’t be.”

~~~

Lin Jing, the person everyone's searching for, is currently meditating with some difficulty. He doesn't know where he is. When he came to, he was tied up, behind him an abnormally shaped large rock, and next to that a tall tree, its top completely out of sight. He seemed to be underwater, but with his body in some large transparent bubble and not affected by it.

Strangely shaped demon beasts surrounded him on all sides... some in typical beast forms, some looking more human, and some basically puddles of mud. They were crowding around him so densely that his delicate nervous system immediately triggered a bout of claustrophobia. He instinctively closed his eyes and started to recite scriptures.

But he's only chanted two lines when he realizes that Buddhist scriptures seem to anger his 'good neighbours' who were already eyeing him up covetously. The demon beasts are becoming agitated, large and small beginning to roar and growl.

Lin Jing gulps with difficulty and manages an unattractive smile: "That...well, um, I didn't know there's a rule against reciting scriptures here. I'm a person of low quality, I'll correct myself at once, I'll correct myself."

The greedy gaze of the beast closest to Lin Jing darkens and it shuffles forward a step, pricking up its nose and carefully sniffing the smell of fresh blood and meat on the man.

With an expression of anguish, Lin Jing cries, "I haven't bathed in three days! I'm not fit to be groped! Watch your manners!"

That demon beast suddenly opens its mouth and takes a bite in his direction. Just then, a more human-looking beast grabs it by the neck for daring to get started on the meal all on its own. Its wrinkled fingers give a hard squeeze, turning the lower-ranked beast into a wind chime in its hands, jingling and jangling as it hangs there, dead.

After killing its tribemate, it screams and rips an entire ear off the corpse. No need for soy sauce or vinegar - it puts it straight into its mouth and eats it.

Then, it generously lifts up the body to throw it into the crowd. As if on cue, countless demon beasts pounce excitedly. In barely half a minute, not even skin or bones are left.

Lin Jing is stunned. “Ami—Amitabha, my Buddha have mercy. Please, dear benefactors, mind your table manners.”

They all growl at him, probably wanting to use him to practice better table manners.

“All right, all right, if you don’t want to then don’t, do as you all please!”

Just then, there's a sharp whistle in the distance, and the demon beasts—the entire ghost tribe—falls quiet. Then, like a thick fog blown away by the wind, they’re all gone.

Lin Jing feels a gust of wind sweep by, and then a man falls out of the sky and rams into the trunk of that great big weird tree next to him.

Four black shackles grow from the tree trunk, securely clamping around his limbs. The man has a single three-foot long icicle stuck in his heart—he’s literally nailed to that tree. For a moment, Lin Jing stops breathing, thinking the man is dead.

But just then, the man opens his eyes.

His breathing is unsteady, but his face doesn't show any emotion. Lin Jing calls out in shock, “Teacher Shen!”

Shen Wei glances at him with his head down, not making a sound. However, Lin Jing can see the cold sweat on his forehead, and his

lips are pale as paper. Looking closely, his body seems to be trembling ceaselessly, but his face still doesn't reveal a single hint of pain.

Then the Ghost Face drops out of the sky, and lands facing Shen Wei. He looks at him with a smile and, after a while, slowly raises his hand to take the mask off his face.

Lin Jing sucks in a breath of cold air. "My Buddha have mercy, grant your disciple a pair of glasses! My eyes are weak... how... how come it looks like there are two Teachers Shen?"

However, upon closer inspection, the 'Teacher Shen' with the mask has even paler skin—not the usual white but pale to the point of looking blue, as if he just climbed out of formalin. Lin Jing can't find words to describe the effect. It's full of resentment and darkness, as if Shen Wei's face with its handsome chiselled features was pasted onto a skull; the more beautiful, the more terrifying.

Lin Jing's eyes are almost popping out of their sockets. He immediately concludes that the newcomer must be truly shameless and had plastic surgery to look like their leader's wife. Clearly, he's an ugly faker!

The faker says leisurely, "I'm a pretty sentimental person, and we go back a long way, but you push me hard with every step. I really have no choice but to kill you, my brother."

As the Ghost Face says this, his eyes glint with a strange light, regretful and eager at the same time. He and Shen Wei are both Ghost Kings. Not to mention that Shen Wei received Kunlun's favour and attained godhood....

"If I devour you, do you think I'd break the entire Great Seal open?"

Shen Wei is pinned to the Ancient Tree of Virtue, in so much pain that he's sweating all over. But when he opens his mouth, the first

thing to come out is a cynical laugh. “What, you can’t take the road of the Artefacts? Did something happen to the Sundial of Reincarnation? Did it turn into a normal rock?”

“It’s you!”

The Ghost Face blinks violently, then slaps Shen Wei so hard his head snaps to one side. Shen Wei clenches his teeth so tightly that he breaks the skin inside his mouth, but he doesn’t feel it.

Casually spitting out the blood, he laughs aloud. “The Sundial of Reincarnation came from the Three-Life Stone, but the Three-Life Stone and the Ancient Tree of Virtue each hold one type of soul²¹⁸. They are connected to each other through the souls of all living things. Only the yin and yang of the Awl of Mountains and Rivers engender one another in a self-contained whole, as an entity that can trap anything in the world.

"It's not in vain that I used the Awl of Mountains and Rivers to lure you here, to land the Soul-Chasing Lure on your body. And then you really lived up to expectations and brought out the big cauldron²¹⁹. You burned the Ink Brush of Virtue in front of everyone. You think I don't know that the crucial hearthstone in the Soul Cauldron is the Three-Life Stone? Where are you going to find a shard of the Three-Life Stone? Never mind. Even if you don't say it, I will still know.

"When the Ink Brush of Virtue came into being, that was when I found the Sundial of Reincarnation and pressed it into the Awl of Mountains and Rivers.

"Why do you think the great cauldron fell into your hands so easily? Do you really think it's because you have particularly good fortune, and everything will fall into your lap?"

“The Awl of Mountains and Rivers...you had the Awl of Mountains and Rivers from the start?”

“Can’t you read? Mountains, rivers; mountains, rivers. Kunlun was where the 36 Mountains and Rivers originated. I succeeded him and am already connected to a hundred thousand mountains. Why would I have to come all the way to fight with you over... something that was always just under my nose?”

Shen Wei’s cold sweat is dripping into his mouth; he carelessly smudges it away with a purse of his lips. “Now, I think perhaps there’s one more thing you want to know. What you used to lure me in just then, what you released in order to contain me... that one thread of chaos that you took out from your own body, now where did I put it?”

The Ghost Face turns various shades of purple, his expression hideously twisted. Suddenly he grasps the icicle stuck into Shen Wei’s chest. Blood has already soaked right through Shen Wei’s long robes, skin and flesh tightly stuck to his clothes. He cuts a very sorry figure.

With a heave of strength, the Ghost Face gives the icicle in Shen Wei’s chest a hard twist. Shen Wei doesn’t scream like he hoped, but he’s no longer capable of speaking.

“I don’t want to know at all.” The Ghost Face is breathing harshly. He leans close to Shen Wei’s face. “I can remain ignorant. I can just drain the blood from your heart until you can no longer sustain this human body. I can extract the Kunlun tendon from your primordial spirit, and then devour you mouthful by mouthful, and the world will have only one Ghost King. Truly, I am the one. Unparalleled. In. The. World.”

In his agony, Shen Wei can’t say a single word, but the corner of his mouth still holds that cynical smile, as if saying to the Ghost Face ‘you can try’.

The Ghost Face pulls the icicle half out of his chest, then brutally shoves it back in again. Shen Wei convulses violently, and finally he faints, head hanging, unmoving.

Lin Jing is scared and horrified, but the Ghost Face doesn't even spare him a glance and walks away in long strides. In the blink of an eye, he has vanished into the bottomless darkness.

~~~

Author's note from Priest: Don't worry about Teacher Shen. He's a naturally dark-hearted monstrous being who just happens to have the ability to blush.

## Chapter 100

"It's all going to be fine, right?" Seeing there's nobody around, Lin Jing can only talk to himself.

The Ghost Face didn't spare him a single glance the whole time. He probably didn't think much of his negligible taoist skills. Lin Jing starts to console himself by muttering: "It's going to be fine, Amitabha, clearly it's going to be fine."

He's on pins and needles. If he weren't tied into a neat bundle<sup>220</sup>, he'd be jumping up and down.

Lin Jing cranes his neck towards Shen Wei, but he can't see him well. It occurs to him that it might be better if he were a turtle: not only would he be able to swim, he'd also have a much more flexible neck.

He looks around carefully, and tentatively calls: "Hey, Teacher Shen! Teacher Shen?"

Shen Wei doesn't respond.

"Shen..."

At this point, a demon beast suddenly appears and bares its crooked fangs at him.

Lin Jing quickly shuts his mouth in fear that it would hate him for his neat row of little white teeth and use his white meat to have a large, delicious meal.

The demon beast licks its lips. It's probably been sent to guard him. After some thought, it doesn't dare steal what was entrusted to its

care. With a constipated expression, it circles Lin Jing a few times and then backs up to eye him covetously.

Lin Jing takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, trying to soothe his miserable mood by silently reciting scriptures. However, when his eyes are closed, he tragically finds that it's not the lilt of the Prajna Paramita<sup>221</sup> sutra that's filling his consciousness, but the nagging itch of a phantom limb: if that brute Zhao Yunlan knew that he was indifferently reciting scripture while watching his darling wife suffer, he'd definitely forget their shared history and turn him into cat food for Da Qing.

Considering this, Lin Jing opens his eyes to lock gazes with the demon beast in front of him.

Then he suddenly says, "Hey, can you talk?"

Of course, high-level members of the ghost tribe are capable of human speech. After guardedly looking at Lin Jing for a bit, the demon beast says in a strange, hoarse voice, "Shut up."

Lin Jing sighs. "Look, they all ran away. There's only the two of us left here. If I shut up, won't you feel lonely? Don't your balls shrivel up in fear when you see His Excellency the Ghost Slayer nailed high on that tree? You do have balls, benefactor, right? Aah, don't be like this! Please be a bit more civilised!"

The demon beast threatens him with a jaw full of teeth like a great white shark.

"I'll shut up, I'll shut up, I'll immediately shut up, really, believe me! Monks don't lie!"

The demon beast retracts its claws and teeth and slowly retreats to one side.

Lin Jing once again looks up at the unconscious Shen Wei.

However, his worries are quickly interrupted. As he cautiously studies the beautiful, blood-drenched man, the wart-covered face of a big demon beast shoots into his field of vision. At once, Lin Jing feels transported from a sentimental little arthouse film into a hardcore horror flick, and he chokes on a breath.

Quietly, he looks away, saying, "So what if I give my eyes a treat, asshole."

Finally he realises, even if Zhao Yunlan is going to make mincemeat out of him, there's nothing he can do to remedy the present situation. Recalling this, Lin Jing really does calm his mind and starts to silently recite the Great Compassion Mantra.

Seeing that he's closed his eyes, the demon beast thinks he's finally behaving, so it stops caring about him. Silently, it looks up at Shen Wei where he's nailed to the ancient tree, then hides further away in fear. In the depths of the Underworld, tranquility is finally restored.

But suddenly, the beast feels something. Alarmed, it raises its head: it sees Lin Jing sitting there with his eyes closed, as if he were a Buddha statue. But the Great Seal behind him seems to be responding to something, lighting up with a soft white glow.

It leaps up, trying to reach past the Great Seal to grab Lin Jing's shoulder. But the moment its hand meets the white light, it turns black and charred.

The demon beast shrieks piercingly, finally interrupting Lin Jing's mantra.

The fake monk is a clever man. When he opens his eyes and sees the situation, he knows at once what's going on. Therefore, he takes a deep breath, finds his voice and starts to recite the mantra out loud. The white light on the Great Seal behind him becomes more

and more scorching. The demon beast guarding him jumps about but can't get close.

The halo of white light gradually expands, some of it even spreading to Shen Wei. The unconscious man seems to feel something; he frowns uneasily.

The demon beast obviously has no idea what's happening, and gets more and more restless. Finally it decides to risk all to stop Lin Jing creating trouble. It rushes over with a howl, deciding that even if it burns up, it has to tear apart the mouth of this damn monk who said he'd shut up but actually risked his life to recite mantras.

There's the sizzling hiss of barbecued meat. The valiant demon beast is broken in body but firm in spirit, and with its gaping mouth—burnt away to nothing but the razor-sharp teeth—it hurls itself forward to bite Lin Jing's neck.

Finally Lin Jing's recital is interrupted. Closing his eyes, he howls, "Buddha, this disciple is about to sacrifice himself and become a saint. Where's my master?! Help! Teacher Shen! Chief! Martial brother!"

He shouts all sorts of nonsense, but Shen Wei doesn't move. After a good while, Lin Jing cracks his eyes open a little, still hunched to protect his neck. The demon beast, which was just so willing to sacrifice itself, has turned tail and is running away in terror.

Lin Jing is stunned. A moment later, he senses something and slowly raises his head, meeting the cold pools of Shen Wei's eyes—the man has woken up.

Tentatively, he calls, "Teacher Shen?"

Shen Wei's gaze moves towards him, and he gives him a courteous, gentle nod.



“You... you’re ok?”

Shen Wei struggles faintly, the shackles on his limbs clanging together. Even that small motion makes blue veins stand out on his forehead. After a while, and a few gasps, he finally says hoarsely, “Not too good.”

He's lost so much blood that his pale lips are trembling.

“Why are you here? How did you end up in, end up in that... that, uh, the hands of that guy who looks like you?”

Shen Wei closes his eyes, leans his head back against the Ancient Tree of Virtue as if he's lost all his strength, and says quietly, “He attacked from the back. I normally could have dodged him, but I couldn’t stop what I was doing, so he managed to stab me. For the time being, it is not a big deal and nothing serious.”

For a moment, Lin Jing is dumbfounded. Then he asks uncertainly, “Really...?”

Shen Wei seems to be getting weaker. As if trying to conserve his strength, he lowers his voice and slows his speech. “But because he stabbed an icicle made from Underworld river water into my heart, I can’t move.”

Lin Jing swallows hard, thinking that it doesn't at all sound like 'nothing serious'. “So what should I do? Do you have a way of getting me down from this broken rock so that I can free you?”

Shen Wei stays silent for a bit: “The ‘broken rock’ behind you is actually the marker for the Houtu Great Seal that Nüwa set up herself.”

Lin Jing is again stunned into silence, and finally says dully, “I’m so scared I’m about to pee myself.”

Shen Wei smiles gently. “Don’t worry. Just now, the Ghost Face is in trouble. I carry Kunlun’s godly tendon on my body, so for now he doesn’t dare do anything to me. He probably doesn’t have time to worry about this place either. For the time being, it’s safe.”

Lin Jing says quickly, “No, no, I should still think of a way to save us. If Chief Zhao knew that I saw you bleed this much and didn’t do anything, he’d turn me into this year’s New Year’s Eve dinner.”

Shen Wei laughs soundlessly, his gaze softening for a moment. After a while, he thinks and says, “Actually, if you really want to try, you can recite some more mantras. The Great Seal originated from Nüwa’s compassion. If you are sincere, maybe it can help you.”

Shen Wei doesn’t actually expect Lin Jing to accomplish anything. Although he’s currently indisposed, his will is unbroken. He casually suggested this just so Lin Jing would have something to do.

But Lin Jing, hearing it, actually sits up with serious determination. Like a news anchor reporting the news, he evens his breathing and, articulating clearly in a mellow and full tone, starts broadcasting the Buddhist evening study program. When Shen Wei first hears him, he finds it a bit funny, but he gradually starts listening to it. The blood on his face makes him look quite vicious, but now his expression becomes gentler. He looks down at the icicle on his chest, his thoughts unfathomable.

The white light around the Great Seal marker becomes brighter, piercing. Lin Jing is really going for it, unexpectedly proving himself worthy of the school of Dharma.

After a while, the ropes on Lin Jing’s body actually melt in the glare, but he doesn’t notice. Although Shen Wei is surprised, he doesn’t open his mouth to interrupt.

Suddenly he realises that the people around Zhao Yunlan are more or less similar to him—birds of a feather really do flock together.

They all have something they're obsessive about, to the point of getting carried away.

This one, for example; and also that little boy who gets nervous the moment he opens his mouth.

Shen Wei narrows his eyes. He has already had some conjectures about the Lantern of the Guardian. Right now, he feels it might be better if it didn't show up at all.

~~~

'Little boy' Guo Changcheng has successfully kept all the families with missing relatives from leaving the town. However, no good news has come.

It's nearly midnight when Chu Shuzhi comes back, travel-worn and weary, with Da Qing. It wouldn't have made sense to collect other things, so they only gathered up IDs, personal keys, phones, and such that they found scattered on the ground. It seems that only living beings were obliterated, but their belongings didn't get pulverised at all; they're completely undamaged.

The small Public Security Bureau in the town is ablaze with lights. Suddenly the first sharp cry rings out from somewhere, and the conference room vacated specifically for them is thrown into turmoil. Chu Shuzhi, carrying Da Qing on his arm, wearily pinches his eyebrows. He waves at Guo Changcheng and takes him to the little office nearby, shutting the door.

Guo Changcheng has a bad feeling about this. He looks at Chu Shuzhi, then at Da Qing. "Chu-ge, where are Chief Zhao and the rest? Did you find Lin Jing? What about Zhu Hong? Is there still no news of the missing persons?"

Chu Shuzhi takes an evidence bag out of his pocket and hands it to him. Inside is a handful of what looks like ashes.

Guo Changchang is momentarily stunned. He has an awful premonition. “This is...”

“Bone dust.”

The evidence bag drops to the floor with a thud.

“Yes, it's pulverised human bones.” Chu Shuzhi briefly explains what happened in the small town, then says to Guo Changcheng, “Call headquarters immediately and tell Wang Zheng that she and Sang Zan will deal with this matter. These people should be treated as missing for now. However, dead is dead—we won't be able to hide it for too long. Let her communicate as she sees fit; let's see how she can put a good spin on the news.”

Guo Changcheng says incredulously, “Put... a good spin on it?”

In fact, it's about asking Wang Zheng to find a way to cover up the truth of the matter.

Chu Shuzhi glances at him. It's definitely the SIU's unwritten rule on handling matters, but for some reason, he doesn't want to tell Guo Changcheng this. Thus, the Zombie King is silent for a moment, then says evasively, “You need to know that, in most situations, DNA can only be detected when there are human remains left. With bone ashes burnt in high temperatures, it's impossible; the DNA has been destroyed. There's not much we can do about it. Even if you collected all the dust in this entire little town, we wouldn't be able to tell the family who it used to belong to.”

“But there should at least be a murderer...”

Chu Shuzhi laughs helplessly. “Guo Changcheng, someone who can secretly plot against His Honor, the Ghost Slayer, even if he uses dirty tactics, must be at least equal to the Ghost Slayer in cultivation.

Have you been with us for such a short time that you still don't know what kind of person the Ghost Slayer is?"

Guo Changcheng looks at him dazedly.

"I'm not afraid to tell you the truth. I cultivated for a thousand years and can already walk underneath the hot sun. Now I'm considered a Zombie King, able to command all the skeletal zombies. My next step up will make me a drought demon, otherwise known as an immortal corpse. However, if it wasn't for Chief Zhao's relationship with him, I'd give someone like the Ghost Slayer a wide berth. Do you understand?" Chu Shuzhi pauses. "We better not touch this case. It's out of our league."

At first it seems like Guo Changcheng can't accept this conclusion. However, he never argues with others and he isn't some hot-blooded teen overestimating his abilities. He feels like a fist is clenched around his heart, but he has no idea what to say; the colour is slowly draining from his face.

Eventually, he asks, "But what about the soul? Even though the body is gone, the soul should still remain, right? How can someone be born and then just disappear like that without any reason?"

Chu Shuzhi is taken aback but Da Qing jumps out of his arms to sit on the table. Suddenly, he opens his mouth and says, "It's happened before."

Both of them turn toward the black cat.

However, Da Qing seems to be lost in thought and doesn't say anything else. After a while, Chu Shuzhi has no choice but to prompt him. "Da Qing?"

He has barely spoken his name before Da Qing's body suddenly starts changing strangely—his cat body stretches slowly and the black fur gradually disappears. Under Guo Changcheng and Chu

Shuzhi's bewildered gazes, he turns into a youth with hair down to his ankles!

He's wearing clothes from some distant era. In fact it looks like he's merely wrapped in a plain piece of cloth, and his feet are bare... This isn't important. The important thing is, he's neither black nor fat.

Chu Shuzhi: "Da... Da Qing?!"

A languid expression appears on the youth's face, distinctly cat-like. He shoots them a glance with eyes a little bigger and rounder than others'. "Yeah."

He jumps off the table to land soundlessly on the floor. His actions are also cat-like—he even walks in a cat's straight line. Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng move out of the way to clear his path in wordless, mutual agreement.

Da Qing says, "I don't know who sealed my memories. I haven't been able to remember things from the far past for a long time now. That time at the top of Mount Kunlun, stimulated by the Holy Tree, I was able to transform. Although I'm really ugly without fur, some blurry memories become a bit clearer like this."

Similarly without fur and thus 'even uglier than ugly', Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng subtly exchange a look.

"The things we met today, the officials of the Underworld call them demon beasts, but actually, in the earliest times they were called the ghost tribe." Da Qing, with his unique aesthetic standards, pays no attention to the reactions of the two in front of him and continues, "I don't know the theory of where the ghost tribe came from. Either way, I know that they're connected to the death of the two great Gods—Fuxi and Nüwa."

"You heard what Shen Wei said at the gate of the resort town. When the ghost tribe was born, the entire land was barren." The black-cat-

turned-teenager's eyes flash. Looking carefully, one can see his eyes change colour with the angle of the light. "But as far as I know, the ghost tribe gnaws human bones and sucks human blood. They also drink the souls of cultivators, but not those of ordinary humans. Human souls are useless to them.

"I think maybe it's because what happened was so sudden. Those people weren't supposed to die. Their bodies suddenly disappeared, but their souls are in fact still alive. The Underworld cannot take them away and so those terrified souls have fled."

Guo Changcheng's brain is a bit slower than others', and it takes him a while to digest what Da Qing's words mean, but suddenly, he says, "Then I'm going to go find them."

Da Qing and Chu Shuzhi, who've already started discussing the possible whereabouts of Zhao Yunlan and Zhu Hong in low tones, lift their heads at the same time. Da Qing asks in confusion: "Why would you look for them? It's the Underworld's problem that they lost living souls - even though right now they probably aren't in the mood to care."

Guo Changcheng is silent for a moment. "But...but I promised them, those family members out there who have missing loved ones, I promised that I would give them an explanation..."

"You can't," Da Qing says. "Plus, they'll never believe you."

"Then I'm going to look for the souls of the dead. How can a person who should naturally exist disappear so suddenly?" Guo Changcheng is particularly obsessed with this question. "That... that's not supposed to happen."

Chu Shuzhi laughs coldly. "There's plenty of things that shouldn't happen. How do you plan on looking?"

Guo Changcheng is stumped with just this one question. His heart starts racing and he lowers his head in embarrassment.

Chu Shuzhi remains silent for a moment, then suddenly takes out a bottle of eye drops and tosses it to him. "Cow tears. They're used to open the Third Eye, allowing you to see living souls."

Guo Changcheng raises his head in disbelief and looks at him excitedly.

"Take care of proper business first. Call Wang Zheng, ask her to deal with external affairs, then send for reinforcements." Uncomfortable, Chu Shuzhi avoids his overzealous gaze. "I'm going to go find Lin Jing anyway, so it's on the way. Don't cause me any trouble."

"You guys go together. I'm going to find Zhao Yunlan," Da Qing says. "I'm worried about him being by himself."

Da Qing takes a few awkward steps in his human form. When he gets to the window, he turns around and warns, "If the kid doesn't know the gravity of the situation, Zombie King, you should take more responsibility. Absolutely be careful. We just got our new office...we haven't even had time to decorate it yet."

Having said that, Da Qing jumps out of the window. In the dim light of the night, he can barely be seen darting away before he disappears without a trace.

~~~

Zhao Yunlan is silent for the whole trip. The Underworld messengers, who still have lingering fears, don't dare approach him for conversation. Only Zhu Hong follows him step by step, no matter what he says.

After passing the Gates and arriving in front of the Underworld Palace, the judge is just about to lead Zhao Yunlan inside when a



lower-ranking ghost suddenly appears to block their road.

The judge frowns.

The ghost smiles quietly. "Lord Guardian. The Ten Kings of the Underworld request the pleasure of your presence."

Before Zhao Yunlan can speak, the judge can't help himself and says, "What is the meaning of this? The Ghost Face has plotted against the Ghost Slayer, chaos is about to break out, the Great Seal is about to completely fracture! Can you take responsibility if you delay official business? Get out of the way!"

The ghost bows deeply. "Yes, Lord Judge, but this humble one is merely acting under orders."

"You're..."

Suddenly, Zhao Yunlan interrupts him. "Take me there. I've lived for this long and still haven't met the Kings of the Underworld."



## Chapter 101

The exalted Halls of the Underworld Court are boundless in all directions. Overhead is an eternally dark firmament, filled with a vast expanse of stars; below are the eighteen levels of Hell, where tongues are ripped out and cauldrons of boiling oil await. On all sides, it's surrounded by watery depths.

Walking there feels like treading on solid ground, but it looks like stepping on a transparent pane of glass. There's a clear view of those below having their skin flayed and their tendons pulled, being thrown onto knives and drenched in scalding oil<sup>222</sup>—and one's own fall seems imminent.

The doom-laden sentences pronounced by the ghost messengers and the blood-curdling screams of ghosts big and small add up to a unique tableau.

The judge stares, seeing that the Eye to Hell has opened. He casts an uneasy glance at Zhao Yunlan and quietly stands aside with the ghost messengers. The Eye isn't usually open, and people in the Court aren't usually able to see what happens in the eighteen levels below. It's only revealed as a warning to the most abominable and intractable souls.

Indeed, this is no way to welcome guests.

Zhu Hong latches onto Zhao Yunlan's arm. If it weren't for his thick clothes, her sharp fingernails would be piercing his flesh. The Ten Kings are glaring down from their respective halls suspended on the walls high above. Somehow, they look extremely sinister and vicious.

Right below their feet, Zhu Hong sees a hunchbacked man tied to a post, two feral ghosts on either side holding him down. Another one pries open the man's mouth and reaches inside with its withered

hand. The ghosts' shrill laughter and the man's unbearable howls of pain explode together. Zhu Hong quivers, her hands ice cold. "Don't... don't go over there."

Zhao Yunlan looks down at her hand clutching his clothes. Patiently, he pries off her fingers one by one. "Wait for me outside."

He strides in, his face blank. To Zhu Hong's alarm, his every step seems to tread on the heads of countless feral ghosts below. Finally, he stands still in the middle of the audience hall, on top of the frying pan that is the inferno of Hell. To Zhu Hong it looks as if he's about to be splashed with hot oil from below.

She grits her teeth, planning to go after him, but she happens to glance down just in time to see the man's long, soft tongue being pulled out of his mouth. It looks like his blood is about to fly right into her face.

Her stomach roils. Finally, she can't bear it any longer and averts her eyes.

A female ghost is climbing up towards Zhao Yunlan, her face cooked into big boils: crispy on the outside, tender on the inside. Zhao Yunlan completely ignores her and lets his cold gaze sweep over the Ten Halls. Then he turns to the side and raises an eyebrow at the quailing judge. He drawls arrogantly<sup>223</sup>, "Are you guys planning on letting me stand while I talk?"

His voice is low and cold, every word piercing through the wails echoing from the eighteen levels of Hell below. He appears entirely unmoved.

The judge gives two ghost messengers a look and they run off; one returns carrying a chair and the other a cup of tea. Without a trace of politeness, Zhao Yunlan rudely plops down on the chair, crosses his legs, and lifts a hand to block the offered tea cup. He looks at the

ghost messenger's paper-like face with an expression halfway between a smile and a sneer.

“I don’t need tea. I’m afraid eating things from the Underworld is bad for my stomach.” Not lifting his head, Zhao Yunlan says, “Ladies and gentlemen, you’ve already put on airs and displayed your power, and you’ve already laid out the table—I see that everyone’s busy so let’s not waste time. If you have things to say, say ‘em; if you have farts to give, give ‘em.”

Ten voices within the Ten Halls superimposed on each other form a unique harmony as they exclaim indignantly: “Boy, you’re rude.”

Ever since the Ghost Face took Shen Wei away right in front of him, Zhao Yunlan has felt a block of ice weighing down his heart, freezing over his internal organs. The sound of things other people say or do seems muffled to him. Everything is unreal and meaningless.

Only now does he get hit by the extreme visuals presented here. His expression doesn't change but his mind somehow clears, and he finds his anger rising belatedly.

His arms are folded in front of him, obscuring his heaving chest. His rusty mind turns a few laboured circles—If the Ten Halls have one brain cell between them, they’ll know that the Ghost Face has taken away the Ghost Slayer. Whether the Ghost Face injured or killed him, either spells trouble for the Underworld. What’s more, the situation at the Great Seal remains unclear. Through the mixture of truths and falsehoods the Ghost Face created, it clearly looks like it’s going to break.

And yet the Ten Halls made such an unfriendly opening statement, not even caring about their appearance. Going by Zhao Yunlan’s thirty years’ experience of dealing with the Underworld, these idiots obviously need help, but they’re still unwilling to set their egos aside and lose face. Either that, or they underrate him as a mortal, and plan to coerce and intimidate him.

Well then... no need to be polite.

He looks up without hesitation, his handsome face relaxed and careless. His gaze sweeps over them, just short of arrogant, and he laughs coldly. "Oh, I'm sorry, Ladies and Gentlemen. My mom and dad didn't raise me right... I'm just trash without a good upbringing. What are you planning to do?"

For a moment all the ghost messengers hold their breaths. Some are unsure of the situation, thinking this man must have come to pick a fight. The Underworld Court is the place for judging sins before and after death. Nobility, generals, or ministers of state: everyone goes in vertically and comes out horizontally. They've seen plenty of people crying and calling for their parents but... but they've never seen somebody like this.

As if he won't have to reincarnate in the future!

The Ten Halls roar in the same ten-voice ensemble: "Zhao Yunlan!"

Zhao Yunlan, thick-skinned as always, adds obstinately, "That's Chief of the Guardian Order to you."

He obviously has no problem embarrassing them. He fondles the gun in his coat pocket, fire raging in his belly. He has a mind to take out these ten pretenders one by one, like the pests they are, but at this point, he still can't afford to completely break off relations with them. They may be pathetic, but they're fighting on his side, so he has to endure them for now.

Suddenly the ground begins to shake; small and sporadic at first, then more and more pronounced. The air in the Underworld Court is suddenly filled with dust.

Zhao Yunlan looks down. Every single oil pot is juddering like a 'shake before drinking' beverage, hot oil spilling out of the large

cauldrons. Ghosts that were previously awe-inspiring are scattering and fleeing the scene. The red-hot copper pillars<sup>224</sup> crack and the steel knives forming the knife mountain jump up and down without pause, like a reverse whack-a-mole.

Suddenly, a ghost messenger kicks open the grand doors of the Underworld Court and falls to his knees with a thud. “Bad news! The Great... The Great Seal is broken!”

As he speaks, the doors of the Court are standing open wide. Everyone looks out together, only to see that the entire River of Forgetfulness is boiling. All the ferrymen have abandoned ship to stand on the teetering bridge, and the narrow road to the Underworld is already submerged in the boiling waters. A huge black shadow visible to the naked eye floats up slowly, until it’s level with the water, then suddenly stops.

Faint lights like fireflies shine on both sides of the submerged road, small dots of light all in a row—Zhao Yunlan remembers those little oil lamps that are apparently called ‘Lantern of the Guardian’.

The faint lights and the huge black shadow confront each other, maintaining a fragile balance. Anyone in their right mind knows how this will turn out. But before the masses of ghosts at the scene can react, another ghost messenger comes dashing over. “The Ghost City! The gates of Ghost City have been breached! It’s all in chaos! They’re going to revolt!”

The Ten Kings, who were originally singing the same tune, start talking among themselves up there, a cacophony of quacking ducks.

Zhao Yunlan sits on the chair, unmoving. He rubs his chin, saying quietly to himself: “Ouch, those dumbasses.”

Then he gets up and grabs the fat judge’s collar, deciding to forego politeness towards these doomed idiots<sup>225</sup>. He pulls his gun out of

his coat pocket and uses the chaos created by the ghost messengers to his advantage, shoving the barrel into the judge's mouth. "I'm not in the mood for small talk. Take me to the Wheel of Reincarnation now, or I'll blow off your head!"

Zhu Hong can't believe he'd dare to be this bold, and shrieks, "Chief Zhao!"

At the same time, one of the Ten Kings suddenly shouts, "Lord Guardian, what are you doing?!"

Without the harmony of all ten voices, his voice sounds much thinner and feebler.

"What am I doing? I'm doing your mom!" Zhao Yunlan laughs coldly. "I've put up with you sons of bitches long enough."

He gives the judge a fierce shove. "Go!"

"Lord Guardian, wait!" This time, the ten voices finally come together again.

Zhao Yunlan hears a loud noise behind him. He turns and finds that the Eye to Hell under his feet has closed. The dark audience hall from before is flooded with light, and the figures of the Ten Kings are clearly visible to everyone. Apart from their weird costumes, they all actually look relatively normal.

Then some sort of mechanism on the wall of the main hall turns. With the noise of a mechanical spring, a stone door opens on the wall, revealing another door inside.

One by one, the Kings of the Ten Halls come down from on high. Each one takes out a key and one by one, they open ten doors. Behind the ten doors there's a vast pool filled with an ethereal mist. For a moment, it doesn't look like the Underworld Court, but rather like the Jade Pool<sup>226</sup>.



Zhao Yunlan fixes his gaze upon the pool, only to see a massive... lamp, dozens of metres high. It looks like the little oil lamps engraved with the words 'Guardian Lantern' lining the sides of the road to the Underworld.

The last to open his door, King Qinguang, turns around and sighs. To Zhao Yunlan, he says, "I won't hide it from you, Lord Guardian. This is the last of the Four Mystical Artefacts, the Lantern of the Guardian."

~~~

When the River of Forgetfulness was stirred up, it looked very scary from the outside. However, 3000 metres beneath the surface, the area around the Great Seal is calm, with only the occasional faint sound like thunder travelling overhead. When Shen Wei hears it, he smiles.

Lin Jing looks up and pays it no mind. He circles around Shen Wei a few times, and then climbs onto the Ancient Tree of Virtue. "Give me a moment, I should have a lock-pick somewhere."

Shen Wei says calmly, "There's no need. You only have to pull the icicle out of my heart."

Lin Jing shivers briefly. "I can really pull it out? Nothing will happen to you?"

"Well, no, nothing will happen. Thank you."

He sounds like he's just talking casually to the waitress at a restaurant.

Lin Jing doesn't feel the same calm; his palms are sweaty. "If you say so, Teacher Shen. It's a shame I can't get you to sign a guarantee."

With that, he wraps both hands around the icicle in Shen Wei's chest. On the principle that a short sharp pain is better than a drawn-out one, he roars and yanks the cone out abruptly. There's a sound of spurting blood and ripping flesh. Shen Wei's body follows the momentum of the ice cone upwards but is ultimately held in place by the chains around his limbs.

Lin Jing breaks out in a cold sweat, but Shen Wei doesn't make a single sound.

With the five-foot-long icicle yanked out of his chest, Shen Wei's blood is gushing everywhere.

His face covered in blood, Lin Jing examines Shen Wei in a panic.

The moment the icicle came out of his body, Shen Wei seemed to have reached the end of his endurance; his hair is wet with cold sweat and his eyes have gone unfocused.

Lin Jing, afraid he might faint, reaches out to pat his face. But then he remembers that he's dealing with the Ghost Slayer, and his hand halts in mid-air, scared to make contact. All he can do is gently tug on Shen Wei's clothes. "Teacher Shen? Can you hear me? Hang in there, just hang in there a bit longer. I'll get you down as fast as I can."

Shen Wei's lips are dry and cracked with blood loss. In his deep stupor, his lips move faintly and he whimpers hazily, "Kunlun..."

"Huh? Kunlun? What about Kunlun?"

With this interruption, he manages to pull Shen Wei's consciousness back from the edge. Shen Wei's gaze becomes clearer and he glances at Lin Jing wordlessly. Then Lin Jing notices the hideous wound in his chest healing little by little. If it weren't for the bloody

hole in his clothes, it might never have been there at all. Quietly, Shen Wei says, "Please give me that icicle."

Lin Jing hurriedly holds it out with both hands. Shen Wei mentioned that the thing was created from the waters of the River of Forgetfulness; maybe that's why it seems to be more biting cold than normal ice.

Suddenly, the icicle in Lin Jing's hands dissolves into a mist the colour of darkest blood. In an instant, Shen Wei sucks it into his mouth and just like that, the cracks in his lips look much better, and his eyes regain some of their lustre.

With a soft sound, the shackles around Shen Wei's limbs fall off, leaving only a few small wounds that look like cuts from a sharp blade. Shen Wei lands silently on the ground.

Lin Jing scrambles down after him. "You okay now? So what do we do now? What about those demon beasts and that masked guy?"

Shen Wei laughed lightly. "Him? He went after that bit of primal chaos that I caught... I imagine the Underworld Court will give him a surprise."

Lin Jing thinks for a moment and then truthfully says, "Amitabha, benefactor, I don't understand."

Shen Wei glances at him with a faint smile, turns around, and disappears right in front of Lin Jing's eyes.

Taken aback, Lin Jing blurts, "Fuck! I lost the Chief's family member! I can say goodbye to this year's bonus!"

An invisible hand comes down on his shoulder, and he hears Shen Wei speaking next to him. "The waters of the River of Forgetfulness are above us. You must think of a way to swim up and reach the

Underworld. Yunlan should be there somewhere. I will follow you to find him, but don't give my presence away just yet."

"Uh, why?"

Shen Wei gives a low laugh. "If I reveal myself, I can't trick the opposition into taking the damage."

Lin Jing shivers for a second, silently reciting the Buddha's name. He fears that his leader is walking dangerously close to the edge.

~~~

By now, deepest night has descended over the human world. Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng are searching the small resort town yet again, flashlights in hand. A whistle hanging around Chu Shuzhi's neck makes sounds of varying pitches as he moves, meant to attract the souls of the dead.

Chu Shuzhi thinks that by taking Guo Changcheng along, he's practically become a pacifist. He's indifferent to anything, hides in the day and comes out at night, all but following in Lei Feng's<sup>227</sup> footsteps—whether it's stopping the girl who ran away from home at the highway exit or searching for missing souls in the depth of the night.

All of a sudden, the whistle around his neck makes a high noise, similar to the call of a thrush. Chu Shuzhi signals Guo Changcheng to stop with a lift of his hand. The two stand in the middle of the deserted path as the whistle gets louder and louder—high and low, with a long trailing ending sound, like a siren leading the way.

Guo Changcheng's eyes, overflowing with Cow Tears, open wide. At the end of the small path he sees a young man in an express delivery company uniform, his expression confused as he approaches them, following the sounds of the whistle.

Guo Changcheng tugs Chu Shuzhi gently and says quietly, "Is that a person or..."

"A ghost."

Guo Changcheng gives a start. But then he sees the young man's vacant expression and loses his fear. Instead, he feels a bit sad.

The young man keeps following the sound of the whistle until he reaches them. He looks at them strangely and scratches his head. "Why are you two gentlemen still outside this late? It's so cold, you should hurry up and get home."

Chu Shuzhi replies, "What about you? You should be going home, too."

The young man smiles. "Yes. The doorkeeper has already signed for the package, no need for me to pick it up today. I can get off work early and go home."

Chu Shuzhi takes a small bottle out of his pocket, opens it, and holds it in front of the young man. "Then come in here. I'll take you home."

The young man looks stunned for a moment, then the smile on his face gradually fades. At that moment, he seems to have understood.

Guo Changcheng suddenly asks, "What's your name?"

The young man slowly raises his head and stares at him. Finally he says, bewildered, "It seems like... I can't remember anymore."

"I remember," Guo Changcheng says quietly. "I looked at your ID card. Your name is Feng Dawei. You were born in 1989 and you have an older brother, right? I have it all written down." As he speaks, Guo Changcheng takes a notebook out of his satchel and opens it to show him. On it are detailed records about each missing person. "Your big brother said, if you're gone, he'll take care of your

mom and dad. Right now, they're very sad, but they'll be okay eventually."

Suddenly Feng Dawei bursts into tears.

Chu Shuzhi remains silent, waiting for Guo Changcheng to continue.

"Come inside and we'll see you off. If you keep wandering, it'll be dawn soon," Guo Changcheng says. "Sunlight isn't good for you."

Feng Dawei lowers his head and wipes at his tears. "I'm dead, aren't I?"

After a moment's hesitation, Guo Changcheng nods.

"How did I die? Did someone kill me? If you catch the culprit, could you avenge us?"

Guo Changcheng doesn't know what to say. Chu Shuzhi says quietly, "The net of heaven is vast but the guilty can never escape its justice. Rest assured."

With his head lowered, Feng Dawei stares at the mouth of the little bottle for a long time. He wipes away more tears. "But how could I just die like that? I haven't lived enough yet..."

"Come inside, so you can get a good life in your next reincarnation." Chu Shuzhi is starting to get impatient.

Feng Dawei gives a bitter smile. "Next life, right, let's talk about it in the next life... Could you give a message to my parents and my brother for me?"

Chu Shuzhi frowns, but just as he's about to say something, Guo Changcheng hastily brings out his notebook and carefully writes 'message' in his childish handwriting, underneath the page titled Feng Dawei. "Go ahead."

Feng Dawei snuffles and prattles on about a bunch of trivialities, and Guo Changcheng takes down every single word. Finally, he holds it out for Feng Dawei to see. The young fellow reads it word for word and finally smiles painfully. "Okay. I can rest assured now—and even if I can't, I have no choice. You're a good man. I thank you."

With that, he takes a deep breath and plunges into Chu Shuzhi's bottle.

## Chapter 102

Chu Shuzhi caps the bottle, stuffs it back in his pocket, and turns to Guo Changcheng. "Let's go find the next one."

Guo Changcheng scuttles after him. After a few steps, Chu Shuzhi says without turning around, "You're doing pretty well."

Guo Changcheng has always been the type to flourish with just a little bit of sunshine. He's so caught off guard he seems to be walking on air. For a moment, he turns rambling and incoherent, barely able to get out a simple "Thank you."

Just then, from somewhere close by, howling sounds reach their ears. A number of feral demon beasts who've remained in the mortal world have seen that there's fresh meat available, and they're rushing over with gaping maws.

Chu Shuzhi grabs Guo Changcheng and pulls him behind himself, sweeping out a foot as he does so. There's a muffled sound as he strikes the beast squarely in the chest, and it staggers backwards and falls on its butt.

A few beasts hesitate and take a step back, but then rush forward simultaneously, side by side.

Chu Shuzhi shoves Guo Changcheng in the chest. "Stay back!"

Then he reaches for his gun and talismans.

However, before the Zombie King, lately turned disciple of Lei Feng, gets a chance to show off and flex his muscles a little, he sees a long shadow fall in front of him. It belongs to a young man carrying a sharp spike—just like the sticks used to sell candied fruit<sup>228</sup>—and his



every move precisely impales a beast. In the blink of an eye, he has turned the beasts into a disgusting meat skewer.

The young man's looks are homely, but his smile seems sincere. He pulls out the stick and wipes it on the side before walking up to Chu Shuzhi. "Hey, friend, are you okay?"

Chu Shuzhi suffers from advanced-stage 'eight-grader syndrome',<sup>229</sup> and is extremely wary of strangers. When the person approaches, he immediately frowns.

Fortunately, the other party is good at reading faces. When he sees Chu Shuzhi's grim expression, he stops and stands in place, smiling amicably. "I'm an independent cultivator. I felt that there was something weird going on over here and so I came to investigate. Please don't misunderstand, brother."

Chu Shuzhi gives a slight nod, his attitude haughty and cold. He doesn't answer, just turns away and says to Guo Changcheng, "Xiao Guo, let's go."

Guo Changcheng follows him hastily, but unexpectedly, the young man also follows uninvited. Seeing that Chu Shuzhi is too wary to talk to people, he quickly switches his barrage of words towards Guo Changcheng. "What were those creatures earlier? Why is there nobody here? What's going on?"

Guo Changcheng isn't used to others asking him lots of questions—he tends to lose track of the order of things, gets confused, and then his brain stops working altogether. He can only look at the man innocently. "I'm not so sure either."

The young man asks, "So, brother, what do you guys do?"

Guo Changcheng says quietly, "We're police."

“Ah! Is that right?” The youth sighs deeply, and then quite naturally starts to chat with Guo Changcheng.

Chu Shuzhi listens to their conversation and doesn't interfere, though he constantly keeps his attention on them. He decides the young man is actually quite good at making conversation. In just a few words, he's already discovered that Guo Changcheng isn't good at talking and has changed his communication style, no longer nagging him with questions but instead chatting easily about the small town, occasionally trying to pick at their origins in a roundabout way.

As they walk, they collect half a dozen more souls. Two small bottles fill up quickly, looking brilliantly colourful in the dark of the night. Chu Shuzhi lines them up in the satchel at his waist and takes out another empty bottle.

The Zombie King is cold and indifferent. The ‘Path of the Undead’ is already a very unconventional cultivation path and not tolerated by society. Chu Shuzhi is haughty and proud, and likes to boast that he doesn't care about his own merits and virtues.

He thinks that so-called ‘morality’ is just a hypocritical front, and the purer and better it seems, the more darkness it may hide underneath.

However, despite his malicious speculation about others, he does put up with Guo Changcheng.

He himself wouldn't be able to say why – maybe it's just force of habit by now or something.

At any rate, he looks at the soul bottles in his satchel with a complicated mix of emotions. On the one hand, he claims to dislike Guo Changcheng for wasting his time on useless errands, but on the other hand, here he is, silently following Guo Changcheng around in the middle of the night to gather the scattered souls.

There are many demon beasts wandering the small town. The unfamiliar young man is quick to help them vanquish the beasts blocking the way, at times even beating Chu Shuzhi to the punch.

He's quick and ruthless, making Chu Shuzhi instinctively more defensive. So when the man asks about the Guardian Order, the Zombie King can't help but coldly remind him, "Mister, some things shouldn't be asked about, so don't keep blabbing. No reason to annoy people, right?"

But Guo Changcheng smiles in embarrassment. "Sorry, my Chu-ge is a very good person. He doesn't mean it quite like that. It's just that we have rules..."

The young man freezes for a moment, but then he nods very amiably. "Ah, haha, nevermind. It's me who's talking too much. Sorry, brother, I don't mean anything by it. I'm just straightforward and quick to say what I'm thinking. I guess it can be annoying... you're not annoyed with me, are you, brother?"

"How could I be?" Guo Changcheng says immediately. "You helped us a lot. When we get back to the county town we'll treat you to a meal. You're a good person."

The young man nods at once, but right then they're passing by a small shop. The young man is closest to it, smiling brightly while talking, but Guo Changcheng inadvertently looks into the reflective shop window...

He's horrified to see that the reflection of the kind and enthusiastic young man in the window is a monstrous creature he's never seen before: its entire body jet-black, at times surging into the shape of a head. It's malevolently focused on Guo Changcheng, its jaw wide open and full of fangs like ancient torture devices.

Before Guo Changcheng can yell out, the electric rod in his pocket reacts. A string of sparks arcs towards the pure-looking man. Chu

Shuzhi whips his head around in shock, only to see Guo Changcheng standing there at a loss, while the young man leaps back a dozen metres in a flash and effortlessly lands on the roof of a small cottage.

Chu Shuzhi knows that the electric rod isn't under Guo Changcheng's control but reacts inevitably to his fear. He puts the glass bottle he's holding back into his satchel and squints up at the person on the roof. "What's going on?"

The young man is no longer smiling. He looks down at Guo Changcheng coldly from his vantage point. "Yes, friend. What's going on?"

Guo Changcheng stutters, "He...he, he...shadow..."

Chu Shuzhi turns on his flashlight. The young man's lonely shadow has nowhere to hide, but no matter how they look at it, there's nothing strange to be seen. The man squats on the roof, unconcerned about the flashlight beam shining on him, and asks casually, "What's wrong with my shadow?"

Chu Shuzhi shoots Guo Changchang a puzzled look. Guo Changcheng is at a loss for words.

The young man shakes his head and sighs. "I'm really doing a thankless job. I helped you guys all the way. It's fine if you don't thank me, but if I hadn't dodged quickly just now, I'd have died at the hands of this young brother who looks so honest and kind."

Chu Shuzhi sticks his hands in his pockets and frowns. The whistle hanging around his neck is suddenly mute. There's a rustle of footsteps in the distance, creepy in the darkness. Guo Changcheng has goosebumps on his neck. Next there's the sound of heavy panting, and after a moment's silence, a massive demon beast burrows out of the ground, its head appearing directly in between

Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng. It stares right at Guo Changcheng.

The Great Seal seems to be losing more and more of its power. The beasts wandering the human world follow the smell of fresh flesh and blood, drawing ever closer. Less than 50 kilometres away, people are still unaware, their whole town brightly lit.

~~~

King Qinguang lifts his hand and erases the image reflected on his magical mirror. With a sombre expression, he addresses Zhao Yunlan, the bandit holding the judge at gunpoint. "My Lord, have you not yet realised? The Great Seal has long been broken. Over the years, the Ghost Slayer has been guarding it. At present, he's nowhere to be found, and it's unknown whether he's even alive. The little oil lamps on the road to the Underworld are only weak buffers. The first to suffer disaster will be the Underworld, and after that the mortal world. Please calm down. If it wasn't for these extraordinary circumstances, we most definitely wouldn't have sought you out like this. Right now, we should work together to survive this great calamity."

Sure enough, Zhao Yunlan thinks, after the stick, they're trying the carrot.

He lowers his gaze without moving and lets the judge go, but he doesn't let go of his gun. He then looks at the mystical Lantern of the Guardian floating in the mist.

"So what are you trying to say, King Qinguang?"

Outside their doors, there's sheer pandemonium. Even now that it's right at their doorstep, this King Qinguang still stands unmoving like a mountain. If 'sitting on one's ass' could go into the Guinness Book of World Records, he'd probably come out top in the three worlds.

Asked like this by Zhao Yunlan, King Qinguang immediately heaves a great sigh. Sounding like an old gentleman in Chinese operas, he says, “The Lantern of the Guardian is the transformed body of the Primordial Mountain God Kunlun. It calms the soul and drives out evil, and is the last of the Four Pillars and our greatest protection. However... oh, Lord Guardian, please take a look.”

Saying this, he tries to lead Zhao Yunlan to the side of the pool where the Lantern is stored, but Zhao Yunlan doesn't move a single step and just gazes at him coldly. King Qinguang, somewhat embarrassed, gestures with his hand instead. The Lantern slowly emerges from the water and turns towards them, tilting slightly. Everyone can see it clearly: the Lantern of the Guardian doesn't have a wick.

“Now that we've reached this point, let us speak frankly. I'm but a small God, and I was very disrespectful to Lord Kunlun—I ask the Mountain God to be forgiving and acknowledge my hard work and my dedication to the safety of the three worlds.”

Taken aback, Zhu Hong looks at Zhao Yunlan. However, the man's expression hasn't changed one bit. It seems like none of this is news to him.

Zhao Yunlan regards King Qinguang quietly. “My IQ is a bit low; I don't quite understand. What do you want to find out from me?”

King Qinguang chokes briefly.

Suddenly, Zhao Yunlan laughs – a strange, sarcastic laugh, as if he's not sure whether to laugh or to cry. “Why did you stop the judge from taking me to see the Wheel of Reincarnation? King Qinguang, you know so many secrets; didn't you know that my memories and my powers were sealed by Shennong? Shennong's body transformed into the Wheel of Reincarnation. I wanted to find a way to recover my powers so that I could maybe help you take care of the aggressive Ghost King outside. Why would you stop me? And also... you puny

little King of the Underworld, what gave you the courage to treat me the way you did earlier?"

King Qinguang didn't expect just one wrong sentence to get him into this much trouble. Quickly, he says, "This small God misphrased it..."

"Seems to me it's not a case of misphrasing anything," Zhao Yunlan interrupts him. "Actually you did know that when Shennong sealed me, my memory and powers somehow became irretrievable, right?"

King Qinguang suddenly looks shifty. "This... this is true. At this critical time, we didn't want the Mountain God to waste his time..."

"You haven't told me what you wanted to find out from me yet," Zhao Yunlan interrupts again.

Zhu Hong seems to sense something in his attitude and takes position behind him in silence, glaring at King Qinguang opposite them.

Without waiting for a reply, Zhao Yunlan dons a fake, malicious smile. "Since you're not able to say it, let me say it for you. You wanted to find out if it's true that Kunlun can never recover his powers, right? Being 'disrespectful' is much less of a crime than what you're really planning, right?"

"Lord Guardian, what are you impl—"

"Originally, I was confused. But then I saw the Lantern of the Guardian that you've been hiding here all this time." Zhao Yunlan lightly raises his eyebrows. "In particular, you keep trying to remind me that the Lantern was created from 'my' flesh. Did you also want to remind me that the Lantern's wick was made from Kunlun's heart blood?"

With those words, Zhao Yunlan has exposed him, and King Qinguang falls silent.

“You brought me here because you wanted to draw a tube of blood from my heart?” Zhao Yunlan gives King Qinguang a once-over with narrowed eyes. “My whole life I’ve been an ass towards people. I thought that I’d long since levelled up to be an invincible one. I never expected to find people who’d manage to be even bigger asses.”

The Ten Kings of the Underworld all descend, their colourful clothes fluttering airily, making them look like a flock of parrots. They once again combine their voices into one harmonious sound: “Lord, you are exemplary in conduct and noble in character. We hope you will always focus on the greater scheme of things.”

Zhao Yunlan only looks at them with a smirk, but Zhu Hong explodes. The bottom half of her body transforms into a gigantic snake tail, encircling Zhao Yunlan. The corners of her delicate eyes elongate to expose the vertical pupils of the cold-blooded animal within. “Do you guys realise that he’s only a mortal?”

Zhao Yunlan is happy to answer for them. “They aren’t blind, of course they know.”

The scales on Zhu Hong’s body are blood red. In fury, she spits with her forked tongue, “Why don’t you just say you want him dead?!”

Zhao Yunlan snorts softly. “Wouldn’t that sound kind of bad?”

The Ten Kings speak in a chorus: “All mortals go through birth, old age, sickness and death. This is the way of reincarnation.”

Zhao Yunlan bursts into laughter.

Another violent tremor comes from below. Everyone looks towards the door and sees the ghosts of Ghost City scrambling about in disorder. The shadow within the River of Forgetfulness is getting more and more turbulent, and the little lamps at the side of the Underworld road are teetering.

Some desperate little ghosts even try to rush headlong into the Underworld Court. Ox-Head and Horse-Face are guarding the doors tightly, one on each side. Horse-face turns his head to speak into the room, "My Lords, we can't hold it much longer!"

"The Ghost Slayer and Shennong agreed to guard the Great Seal, taking over for Kunlun. They wouldn't kill for no reason. Are you so sure he'll tolerate everything that you dare act completely unafraid in front of him?" Zhao Yunlan sighs and quietly says, "Gentlemen, let me offer you some advice out of turn: kindness begets kindness."

Zhu Hong transforms entirely into a giant python, her scales bright red in anger. She snaps at King Qinguang, who's standing in the very front. A few ghost messengers rush forward, lifting their pitchforks and broadswords to protect their King.

King Qinguang lifts his hand and points at Zhao Yunlan: "Take him!"

"Take who?" a voice cuts in with cold inquiry.

They watch in surprise as a stream of shifters burst in, each one of them a clan leader or elder, amongst them Fourth Uncle Snake. He scans Zhu Hong's body for a moment, but even though he originally wanted to withdraw completely and force Zhu Hong to go along, surprisingly doesn't scold her. It's his year of bad luck, so he gets to be the one to step forward and solemnly salute Zhao Yunlan:

"Mountain God, I'm but a lowly snake, and my eyes must've been blind.²³⁰ I didn't recognize your Highness."

Even the Crow Tribe knows whose reincarnation he is. It's hard to say whether the leader of the Snake Tribe really didn't recognize him or was only pretending. Zhao Yunlan doesn't expose him on the spot, just nods with a smile, as if watching a good show.

Fourth Uncle Snake says reasonably, "The Underworld controls the Wheel of Reincarnation, and you've always been insolent and rude

to the Taoists. I won't argue about trivial matters with you lot, but Lord Kunlun has sheltered the shifter tribes for thousands of years with great kindness. No matter how useless we are, we cannot allow your rude treatment of the Great Sage to go unchecked!"

King Qinguang speaks up. "What's the meaning of this, shifters?"

The Crow Tribe elder, whose tribe only recently rejoined the other shifter tribes, says hoarsely, "If anything is to blame, it's the Ten Kings' perfidy... too treacherous and rude."

Fourth Uncle Snake frowns. He hadn't planned on being this blunt, and this direct nudge puts him on the spot.

But someone else speaks up. "Venerable Kings, we gave you a free hand in the important matter of climbing up Mount Kunlun to suppress the Ghost King, but you stab us in the back? What is the meaning of that?"

This time, it's the Three Pure Ones²³¹.

"The Underworld is exceedingly impudent. So there was a reason you summoned us up to Mount Kunlun to confront the ghost tribe with you. You secretly put a tag on our bodies then, and caused the chaos in the Profane Lands to leak everywhere. If you had even a tiny bit of a conscience, you'd keep these things tightly constrained underground."

It doesn't take long for the Eighteen Arhats of the West²³², immortals from various places, and other involved parties to arrive.

King Qinguang refutes indignantly, "The collapse of the Great Seal is a calamity spanning the three worlds; why should the Underworld alone be held responsible for it?"

This sentence stirs up the hornet's nest. In the Underworld Court, the great Gods from all walks start quarrelling and nobody pays attention to Zhao Yunlan anymore. He turns to Zhu Hong, who has obediently transformed and stood aside when she saw her Fourth Uncle, and mutters, "Why didn't I bring popcorn and Coke?"

Just then, the black shadow explodes out of the River of Forgetfulness, flaring up dozens of metres and extinguishing all the little oil lamps at the same time. Someone screams sharply: "Ghost tribe!"

Sure enough, some members of the ghost tribe have appeared amidst the chaos – not many, but they jab at everyone's high-strung nerves.

Coincidentally, the Ghost Face emerges from the River of Forgetfulness right at that moment.

Although the Great Seal is shaking and crumbling, it isn't actually breaking—at present only Shen Wei and the Ghost Face understand the situation clearly. In order to entrap Shen Wei, the Ghost Face extracted chaos from within the Great Seal's cracks for years and years, to make it look as if it was breaking. But then Shen Wei sealed away that small amount of chaos, and nobody knows where.

At first, Ghost Face didn't think much of it, but he's paranoid and neurotic, and when he was sitting underneath the Ancient Tree of Virtue and heard Shen Wei tell such an obvious lie, he got agitated at once.

Ghost Face didn't expect such a small ball of chaos to lead to such a big bang in the Underworld. Having followed its trail, he sees the battle on the shore just as he's emerging from the water. He realises he's been duped, but by the time he tries to retreat, it's already too late.

In the chaos, someone screams, "Ghost King!"

King Qinguang jumps on the chance to pass the blame. "The Ghost King is here already! Do you Taoists really have to fight over who's right and who's wrong at this juncture?"

The Ten Hall chorus quickly harmonises with him. "Everybody should be aware of what is at stake. We ask that you set aside your sect prejudices and unite against the ghost tribe!"

Immediately, the Ghost King is mobbed from all sides. Inwardly, the Ghost Face resents Shen Wei for tricking him, but more importantly, he thinks that their business has only ever been between the two of them, and it should stay that way. He has nothing to say to this insignificant, ant-like rabble.

Abruptly, he rises a few feet out of the water. He whistles once, and countless beasts emerge from the waters of the River of Forgetfulness. The all-devouring black chaos forms an enormous barrier behind them.

The battle now rages both inside and outside the Underworld Court.

Zhu Hong is worried for her Fourth Uncle and itching to join the shifter tribe, but Zhao Yunlan holds her back. "Look carefully at how powerful the people in there are. Don't go making trouble, little girl."

At this time, a relatively advanced beast, driven wild by bloodlust, rushes at Zhao Yunlan. Zhao Yunlan lifts his gun and shoots, but the beast dodges. Just as he's about to shoot again, a familiar bell rings behind him. Lin Jing, who has been missing for several days, appears and tosses out multiple 'ㄱ' charms²³³.

At once, the beast melts into a wisp of black smoke.

Lin Jing drags Zhao Yunlan over towards the secret room containing the Lantern of the Guardian. "Still not avoiding trouble... why are you two always trying to join the excitement?"

Zhao Yunlan gives Lin Jing an inscrutable look. “Earlier, the two screams came from you?”

Lin Jing hesitates, and finally says. “But I changed my voice.”

“Even if you break your vocal cords, I’ll still recognize you.” Zhao Yunlan’s face is dark like an oncoming rain storm. “Shen Wei, you better get your ass out here right now!”

Chapter 103

Shen Wei finally appears, slowly, from behind the big stone door of the secret room. He looks more worried than he did even when he ordered Lin Jing to commit crimes.

Zhao Yunlan's gaze falls on the blood on his chest and stops there. His fists clench at his sides, the veins bulging on the back of his hands. He looks like he's about to punch Shen Wei.

In the end, though, he doesn't lift a finger and says nothing, with his tongue pressed against his upper gums to force himself to shut up. He starts counting silently, losing his place twice. His constant self-deprecating comments on his 'low IQ' have finally caught up with him – he needs nearly two minutes before his count stumbles up to 30.

Lin Jing is quick to see his opportunity. The moment Shen Wei appears, he covers Zhu Hong's mouth and drags the confused woman aside.

The longer Zhao Yunlan is silent, the more restless and anxious Shen Wei gets. Finally, Zhao Yunlan opens his mouth. "Shen Wei."

For a split second, his tone is like the one he used after seeing Shen Wei's deception in the Holy Tree – that weary, 'If you're like this again, then I'm really going to turn my back on you.'

Shen Wei panics and wants to walk towards him, but as soon as he lifts a foot, Zhao Yunlan raises a hand to stop him.

"Don't come closer." Zhao Yunlan lowers his head and his voice at the same time. "Don't come over; right now isn't the time to show yourself."

Shen Wei can only stop and stand still.

Zhu Hong has no idea what's going on and asks Lin Jing, wide-eyed, "What does that mean? What does he mean by 'right now isn't the time'? Why not?"

Lin Jing says quietly, "Amitabha, leave it alone."

Zhu Hong is speechless.

Zhao Yunlan looks at Shen Wei's torn clothes and the bloodstains on his chest. After a while, he asks, "Does it hurt?"

Shen Wei nods instinctively then quickly, his chin stuck low, shakes his head.

Lin Jing isn't very good at his actual job, but he excels at matchmaking and other glib things. Middle-aged housewives love him. As soon as he sees the situation, he smells blood and says bitingly, "How could it not hurt? He fainted twice from the pain."

Zhao Yunlan takes a breath, expression livid. He doesn't spare Lin Jing a glance, only fires a burst of chilling words at him. "Lin Jing, keeping your mouth shut just once wouldn't kill you."

Lin Jing turns around, pulling Zhu Hong along, and feigning great interest, points at the melee: "Hey, lady, look, they're fighting."

Zhu Hong suddenly takes interest in her dusty shoes, studies them intently and silently distances herself from Lin Jing.

Zhao Yunlan glances sideways at the battle outside. His body relaxes and he leans against the stone wall on his other side. After a while, he says, "So you somehow managed to force the Ghost Face's hand."

Shen Wei quickly confesses, "I lured him to use the Three-Life Stone as the hearthstone of the Soul Cauldron at the summit of Mount Kunlun. The Cauldron and the Ink Brush of Virtue linked up the Dial

of Reincarnation, and the Aul of Mountains and Rivers was used to lock it in.”

Zhao Yunlan doesn't look at him. He speaks very slowly, as if formulating his thoughts as he speaks. “The summit of Mount Kunlun... Now you remind me, it was then that you left a mark on everyone there, right? Thinking it over, it can only be you. If the Underworld were able to get this far in secret, it wouldn't be the way it is now.”

Shen Wei holds out his hand, a single long strand of hair in his palm. He closes his palm, and the strand disappears at once. A moment later it lands in front of Zhao Yunlan—the long black hair that he once fondled admiringly now floats mid-air in front of him. It slowly diffuses a hint of highly unsettling black energy... the same black energy that emanated from the Ghost Face's collection of chaos.

Shen Wei reaches out and picks the strand of hair out of the air. Back in his hand, it breaks into several pieces. In a very cooperative manner, he confesses his guilt: “The mark was this.”

Zhao Yunlan nods. “Oh, I should actually have thought of it already when you split the ground open at the village. You're the guardian of the Great Seal. If even I could tell that was a Shadow Blitz, then how could you have no idea?”

Shen Wei says, “The Ghost Face isn't at his best right now. A part of his power was sealed in the Houtu Great Seal, so he doesn't know that my senses are a little keener than his. I felt it at the time—the broken pieces of the chaos were just under our feet.”

“And you still let him stab you? What's wrong with you?”

Shen Wei has no reply to that.

“Don't play dead, say something!”

“At the time I...” Shen Wei’s voice gives out for a moment and he quickly clears his throat. “It really wasn’t my initial plan. I wasn’t impatient at first. Events were already in motion, and there was still time, after all. I didn’t plan to act so quickly. It was the Ghost Face who was pushed to the point of desperation. He used the fragments of chaos to lure me into a trap. I had a flash of inspiration and wanted to use the opportunity to push any ill consequences onto him. Later, when I was collecting the shards of chaos, I didn’t want to fail at the last step, so...”

Zhao Yunlan leans his head against the stone wall and smiles sourly. “Right, how quick and smart you are; you heard me say two sentences on Mount Kunlun and so you made up a world of half-truths. You used the ‘cut off my arm’ thing to test me and found that you couldn’t afford to mess with me... so you decided to fool me too?”

“You wouldn’t have agreed...” Shen Wei says in a low voice.

His lips are trembling slightly. Lin Jing looks on coolly. He can’t tell whether Shen Wei is pretending or not—regardless, Shen Wei looks as uneasy as a criminal waiting to be tried after being caught at a serious crime.

Zhao Yunlan has fallen silent again.

Shen Wei suddenly disappears. Zhao Yunlan keenly senses someone leaning in and gingerly propping his hands against the stone wall on either side of his body. Next, his fist is gripped in an icy hand.

By his ear, Shen Wei says softly, “If you’re upset, just hit me; I won’t dodge.”

Zhao Yunlan snatches his hand back and pulls away.

With one move, Shen Wei embraces him, pressing him tightly against the stone wall.

Zhao Yunlan frowns. "Let go. Don't stoke the fire, I'm warning you."

Shen Wei says nothing at all.

When Zhao Yunlan pushes Shen Wei to try and shove him off to the side, Shen Wei gives a low grunt of pain. Zhao Yunlan feels him tremble slightly and stops applying force at once. Slowly, he feels around Shen Wei's chest, touching the dried-up blood on his clothes.

After a while, he retracts his hand and says evenly, "What do you plan on doing next?"

Shen Wei is silent for some time. Finally, he says rather despondently, "Nothing, just sit safely on the sidelines of the fight to reap its rewards later²³⁴. I... I suppose I have been this despicable since I was born. I don't want to indulge these people—they're annoying like hovering flies, all out for personal gain, just waiting for someone to protect them."

Sensing Zhao Yunlan's resistance, Shen Wei eventually lets go of him and steps aside. "Even though the Ghost Face has always seen me as his enemy, I don't see him as mine. I only promised Shennong to guard the Great Seal."

Shen Wei's words are subtle, but their implication is pretty obvious—he doesn't attach any importance to the Ghost Face, who's always been chasing him, at all.

They both fall silent. Zhao Yunlan glances back at the Lantern of the Guardian floating lifeless on the water. He digs into his pants pocket and, still frowning, takes out a cigarette and lights it. To Lin Jing and Zhu Hong he says, "We're done here. Let's go back and work overtime to catch up with the report."

Lin Jing touches his nose. He feels awkward, being forced to listen to his leader and his family cold-shouldering each other, so he tries to lighten the atmosphere with a joke. "We just started work and have to do overtime right away? Shit's about to go down²³⁵, shouldn't we get a bonus?"

"Sure," Zhao Yunlan says without looking up. "10 kilos of monk meat per person."

Lin Jing is speechless.

He smacks himself in the face, and then folds his hands in prayer. "Amitabha, that's what you get for shooting your mouth off."

Zhu Hong suddenly speaks up. "Chief Zhao, I need to stay for a while."

Zhao Yunlan glances back at her.

"My Fourth Uncle is still here. It's not appropriate for me to go with you."

"Mmm." Zhao Yunlan thinks it through. It does make sense, so he nods. "All right, keep a safe distance and take care of yourself."

With that, he drags Lin Jing outside with him. A few careless demon beasts pounce on them, but the two of them finish those off wordlessly.

Zhu Hong watches as they leave and fall into their easy partnership, walking inconspicuously on the fringes as if they weren't there. She relaxes a little and says tentatively, "Lord Ghost Slayer?"

Out of thin air, his voice replies, "What is it?"

Zhu Hong is stunned; suddenly she jumps up. "What the fuck, you're still here?"

Shen Wei says nothing for a moment, then he asks quietly, "Where would I go?"

Incredulously, Zhu Hong says, "Why didn't you go with them?"

This time, Shen Wei's silence lasts longer.

"Ghost Slayer?" she says. "Teacher Shen? Hello, hello, can you hear me? Are you still there?"

"He probably... doesn't want me to go with them, right?" Shen Wei's voice comes from beneath the Lantern, and Zhu Hong can't help but walk a few steps closer. She hears him say, "He said if I lied to him again, he'd turn his back on me."

Zhu Hong is dumbstruck.

"You lied to him before?" she asks, and before he can reply, says, "No, that's not the point—the point is, you believe what he says?"

Concealed by the Lantern of the Guardian, Shen Wei isn't worried that others might see him, so he reveals a hint of his silhouette and looks at Zhu Hong in bewilderment.

Zhu Hong unceremoniously props one hand against the stone wall and sighs heavily. "In Chief Zhao's words: 'my IQ is pretty low to begin with, and I don't understand what you're all up to.' Anyway, those intrigues and schemes all seem to be very impressive—but are you sure someone as gullible as you can fool him? If so, what he feels for you is really true love."

Shen Wei absorbs this in silence.

"Zhao Yunlan has talked about turning Da Qing into a pot of stew close to a hundred times for sure. That stupid cat still is living a life of comfort, isn't he, getting fatter and fatter?" Zhu Hong never dared to

imagine there'd be a day when she could lecture the Ghost Slayer with such assurance; and this Ghost Slayer is even her unbeatable rival in love. Thinking about that, she feels both bitter and elated; there are no words in any human language for her mix of emotions.

“When I got there, it was just in time to watch the Ghost Face carry you off. Zhao Yunlan looked like he wanted nothing more than to cut him to ribbons—I’ve been following him for so long, I can tell at a glance whether he’s truly angry or just pretending to be grumpy. Do you think that makes me happy?” Zhu Hong isn't sure what she’s thinking either, she just bluntly says what's on her mind. “Why would he be angry with you, just because you lied to him? Shen Wei I really want to... no, forget it, I don’t want to anymore, I don’t dare to anyway—Let's say you run away from home and your mother is panicking, and after she finds you she gives you a couple of smacks, would you feel treated unjustly?”

Shen Wei gives her a puzzled look.

They silently stare at each other, then suddenly she grimaces and says stiffly, “Sorry I forgot you don’t have a mother.”

After a pause, Shen Wei says, “It’s all right.”

Zhu Hong doesn't know where to go from there, and there's an awkward silence. But then, Shen Wei suddenly says, “You... really like him, don’t you.”

His words get her all choked up. Regretfully, she says, “Yeah.”

Shen Wei considers it. “Then why are you telling me these things?”

Zhu Hong gives him a blank look. “I only want you to upset him less.”

A hint of confusion flashes across Shen Wei’s face. He seems lost in thought, frowning slightly. His eyes reflect the shimmering ripples of the waters below the Lantern of the Guardian. After some time, when

Zhu Hong starts to think maybe his soul has drifted away, Shen Wei abruptly focuses again and nods at her.

"You are right," he says sincerely. "Thank you very much."

With that, he stands up, the outline of his body disappearing. Zhu Hong hears his footsteps come up beside her. "Miss Zhu, please extend your hand for a moment to receive this."

Zhu Hong doesn't understand, but she holds out her hand. What Shen Wei puts in her hand is a small twig, not even as long as her palm. There are two tiny green buds on it. Naturally it doesn't weigh much, but this unassuming little twig seems unusually heavy to her.

"This is..."

"This is a twig from the Holy Tree on Mount Kunlun," Shen Wei says. "Ever since the beginning of the world²³⁶, only Nüwa has ever cut a twig off the Holy Tree. She planted it a thousand feet below the Underworld river, to become the current Ancient Tree of Virtue. This is the second twig, keep it well."

Zhu Hong staggers and nearly drops it, flailing to cup it in her hands. She lifts it in front of her eyes with awe, looking a lot as though she wants to worship it.

"The twig of the Holy Tree became dead wood at the entrance to the Profane Lands... most likely it reacted negatively to the nature of our tribe. During the years I took over for Kunlun, I made a great effort, but still couldn't take care of it. Over millennia, I only got it to sprout these two shoots. I've always felt bad about it." Shen Wei adds, "Your Fourth Uncle may not be able to look after you. You stay here and hide well away from them. In case you run into danger, the two new shoots can save your life twice."

Shen Wei pauses briefly. "If you don't use it up, wait until the dust has settled. Then, I'd be grateful if you could help me find a scenic

spot surrounded by mountains and rivers where to plant it.”

Somehow his words feel like he's passing on something to her, and Zhu Hong can't help but ask, “Where are you going?”

Shen Wei: “I’m going to chase after him.”

“Does he need to be chased?” Zhu Hong immediately puts aside her own uncertainty, purses her lips and says sourly, “Don’t pay attention to how quickly that bitch walked away. Now that the fire’s gone down, he’ll regret what he did. He’s definitely waiting for you, don’t worry.”

The unseen Shen Wei doesn't respond again; he might already be gone.

~~~

Zhu Hong is absolutely right. Zhao Yunlan really didn't go far. He's found a hidden spot just at the intersection of the Underworld road and is pacing back and forth. As a result the ground is full of cigarette butts.

His obvious menopause symptoms make Lin Jing, who’s good at avoiding harm and reaping benefits, stay well away from him. He silently squats off to the side and uses binoculars from who knows where to watch the battle reach its climax.

As Zhao Yunlan is lighting the twelfth cigarette of the day, a hand shoots out from nowhere, snuffing it out and snatching it right from his mouth.

Zhao Yunlan freezes, and looks sideways to see Shen Wei standing there uncertainly, looking like he wants to say something but doesn't know how to start.

After a while, Shen Wei looks away and slowly lowers his head. He’s covered in blood from head to toe. He looks completely bedraggled,

and his glasses are long gone. His fringe is long enough to hang over the bridge of his nose and nearly cover his eyes. He looks incredibly woeful.

After a long silence, Zhao Yunlan lets out a helpless sigh, reaching out to him. "Come here."

Shen Wei sweeps him into his arms.

*My poor eyes*, Lin Jing thinks to himself, totally ignored by everyone.

Looking over from a distance, he notes that the tribes seem to have finished their discussions. Many of the Underworld ghost messengers have become cannon fodder; by silent agreement, they've crowded the Ghost Face and most of the ghost tribe in an obscured corner. At this point, almost half of them seem to be dead.

Lin Jing watches impartially, feeling that the gaudy opera-like costumes of the Ten Underworld Kings must be a vital part of what makes everyone hate them.

Even shattered into fragments, the chaos is extremely powerful. Immortal or ghost, everyone avoids its edges. Those who fail are silently swallowed up, hide and hair. The chaos seems to be able to cancel out their entire existence.

Lin Jing watches as the fragments of chaos force King Qinguang to retreat, until he falls into the River of Forgetfulness with a splash. The gigantic sleeves of his robes make him float, looking like a piece of soaked rainbow candy.

Just then, a huge net surfaces from the river, like a large fish net. It envelops all of King Qinguang and drags him right out of the water. He's drenched head to toe and crawling up the shore in a flail of limbs. While the people from the Underworld were distracted, the elites of the various tribes have at some point arranged themselves in the positions of the Fuxi Eight Trigrams to lay down this large net.



"Amitabha," says Lin Jing, "what's that?"

Shen Wei's voice suddenly comes from behind him. "It's the Fuxi Eight Trigrams Net."

Startled, Lin Jing almost drops the binoculars. He turns his head and gives a dry laugh. "So um, you're no longer busy?"

Zhao Yunlan 'unintentionally' steps on his foot.

Ignoring his antics, Shen Wei continues speaking: "The shifter tribes must have brought it with them. Rumours say that Fuxi originated in the East, and Chiyou only came after the Holy Seal. After Chiyou, the shaman and shifter tribes were born. When Fuxi died, he left behind the Fuxi Bow and Eight Trigrams. Later, Houyi took the Fuxi Bow and it fell into the hands of the humans. It seems the Eight Trigrams Net is an innate secret of the shifter tribes. Sure enough, each tribe has its own hidden treasures."

After the Eight Trigrams Net has appeared, the fragments of chaos seem to shrink as he speaks. For the first time, they begin to retreat. The Ghost Face is suspended high in the air, a distorted expression displayed on his mask.

Suddenly, a burst of golden light explodes from the Eight Trigrams Net. Lin Jing, startled, whispers, "That's the golden seal of the Buddha I worship in the West... Legend says it's the last magical treasure to suppress evil in the days of the decline<sup>237</sup>."

Golden light suffuses the entire Underworld. The little lamps along the road to the Underworld, extinguished before, light up again. This time their flames are considerably brighter, like a fire dragon swishing its tail along the road, lighting up everything with its halo.

All the fragments of chaos, along with countless demon beasts, are sucked up by the giant net in an instant. But it can't cope with the

Ghost King, who has at some point arrived at the Underworld Court.

He's indeed powerful, but that power made him end up as a solitary leader.

Shen Wei sighs lightly. "The dust has settled. Let's go."

This fight is over.

Lin Jing starts to follow them, but he has a strange, uneasy feeling, as if something's about to happen. He glances around, absently picking up his binoculars. His gaze catches on the Ghost Face, who looks as if he's torn between laughing and crying.

Suddenly, his mask cracks open in the middle, dropping in two halves and revealing a face resembling Shen Wei, but far more gloomy. His robes flutter up despite there being no wind, flapping like a flag.

"Very good," Lin Jing hears him rasp. "You won, I can't fight you. You just don't consider me worth fighting—very good."

Shen Wei stops in his tracks.

"You and I were born the same; I don't understand how I'm inferior to you. You're the lone and noble, honourable Ghost Slayer. I'm the infamous Ghost King, wanted dead by tens of thousands—this is nothing!" The Ghost Face lets out a low laugh. "Of course this is nothing. I am the Ghost King from the heart of the Great Land, I can kill both humans and gods across heaven and earth! I only hate that you're behaving so disgracefully. You don't even dare fight me, and instead get these ants to humiliate me.

"You'll regret this." He laughs again. "You think you can win without having to fight? You'll regret this, my good brother."

Abruptly, his body starts growing, shooting up until he's as tall as a mountain. A muffled roar comes from thousands of miles below ground, rumbling up like thunder.

Suddenly, Shen Wei's expression changes.

The Ghost Face lets out a loud laugh; then his body shatters into millions of pieces. The earth quakes violently. The Fuxi Eight Trigrams Net containing the rounded-up fragments of chaos breaks.

## Chapter 104

Guo Changcheng is clutching the electric baton Zhao Yunlan gave him, his hands still ice cold with fear. He's just turned the beast that was coming at him into a burnt pancake.

The young man who'd been so cheerfully talking to them is now a monster with a head that's only connected in one precarious spot, as if split in two, and a mouth that can open 180 degrees, revealing a blood red tongue and a mouthful of fangs.

Collecting the souls of the dead in a deserted town was already terrifying. Nobody could've expected that just to be the starter, with the hardcore work still waiting for them here.

Chu Shuzhi dodges the friendly fire of accidental sparks, and holds out the strap of his messenger bag to Guo Changcheng. "We worked hard to save these. Hold it, don't drop and break them."

Guo Changcheng's hands shake like he has Parkinson's, so he finally has to cradle the whole bag in his arms.

Chu Shuzhi asks seriously, "Are you afraid?"

Guo Changcheng nods honestly.

"Scared to death?"

Guo Changcheng nods again, looking like he's about to cry.

"That's great," Chu Shuzhi says. "Keep it up."

Guo Changcheng is speechless.

With this distraction, fewer random sparks come from the electric baton. But Chu Shuzhi glimpses something from the corner of his

eyes, and he taps Guo Changcheng hard on the shoulder. He points behind him and says with an eerie voice, "Look, what's that?"

It's a few demon beasts still some distance away. Guo Changcheng was already pretty scared; caught off guard by Chu Shuzhi frightening him like this, he whips his head around, terrified, and lets out a shrill, inhuman scream.

With that, electricity slaughters several demon beasts who were rushing their way, hoping for a good meal.

Turning fear into power. One could say that although their leader is pretty stupid, he at least has a knack for making the best of a bad situation.

Chu Shuzhi gives Guo Changcheng a thumbs-up. Faster than the eye can see, he jumps straight onto the roof of a row of little townhouses. He pulls off his winter coat and throws it down, exposing arms that have turned a weird blue colour.

Chu Shuzhi moves his fingers, his stiff joints cracking, and pulls out his little bone flute. His blue and purple lips turn up in a ghastly smile. Then, he plays a string of strange notes, and the originally calm ground surges up. The layer of 'dust' on the ground of the small town rises, then coalesces at lightning speed, forming into complete skeletons. Half of them land next to Guo Changcheng, the rest rush towards the mysterious young man.

By now, the young man's eyes have turned completely red. He narrows them into slits and looks at Chu Shuzhi. "Zombie King."

Chu Shuzhi ignores him. The flute becomes shrill; a few skeletons respond and begin to attack. A sharp skeletal fingerbone stabs into the young man's chest. Like a ghost, he instantly disappears, leaving the skeleton's fingers stabbing five small holes into the ground.

The young man counter-attacks with a heavy blow. The skeleton moves too late and is smashed into pieces, its white bones scattering everywhere. With the sound of the flute, though, the scattered bones reconnect and gather to encircle the young man again.

The young man's hands and feet are hard as rock, and he smashes a skeleton with every punch and kick. But the skeletons Chu Shuzhi summoned are condensed from bone ashes all over the town and can come back together even after being dispersed. Their attack force may be low, but they're first-class at harassing him. As long as the opponent is just a little careless, the sharp, thin finger bones can stab him right through.

The young man sneers, "Never mind the others, but don't you think it's ridiculous that you, the deadly Zombie King and a criminal, joined the Guardian Order? Why don't you pretend to be this respectable when you're killing people and bleeding them and eating their corpses?"

"My sins have been redeemed." Even at a time like this, Chu Shuzhi still subconsciously glances towards Guo Changcheng, but the young man is busy dealing with an endless stream of beasts and hasn't heard anything. Chu Shuzhi sighs, oddly relieved. "What are you?"

The young man grins, breaks off a skeleton's head and stuffs the whole skull in his mouth. He chews and crunches down on it. "Me? I and my tribe developed on our own, all natural."

"Guard the souls of the living, pacify the hearts of the dead, pardon the crimes of those who are trapped, turn the wheel for those who are reincarnating." The young man recites the words on the Guardian Order Token word for word. He clutches the four limbs of a skeleton and tears them off like plucking corn, crushing them in his

hand. “Whoever wrote this must be a big fool,” he says with a cold laugh.

Due to Guo Changcheng’s ‘special’ status—being only a human—he only signed an employment contract when joining the SIU and isn't controlled by the Guardian Order, so he only vaguely knows that this thing even exists and doesn't know much about it. He's hearing the words for the first time now, from the mouth of some random monster. Still, they take over his brain and make him freeze.

With him dazed like this, his electric baton naturally quietens.

While he's unresponsive, a demon beast that's been hiding in a corner takes the chance and rushes him.

At the same time, one of the skeletons that Chu Shuzhi summoned moves like a real person: it steps abruptly sideways, opens its arms and uses the last two ribs left of its rib cage to shield Guo Changcheng.

The demon beast smashes it to pieces. Panicked, Guo Changcheng backs up a few steps, trips over a large crack in the ground, and falls on his butt. Closing his eyes, he raises the baton over his head, and just as the beast’s massive claws are about to tear into him, it goes off.

The beast is cooked medium rare.

Guo Changcheng sits on the ground, gasping for breath. The shattered skeleton pieces itself back together unsteadily and walks towards him slowly.

Though Guo Changcheng knows Chu Shuzhi created the skeletons, he can't help but cower a little when the white bone hand reaches out for him. To his astonishment, the skeleton puts its hand on top of his head and gently pets his hair, as if soothing him.

A forensic scientist could've told Guo Changcheng that this skeleton belonged to a male, very young, probably only in his early twenties.

The souls of the living and the hearts of the dead. Maybe in every skeleton about to turn to dust, there remains a tiny fragment of memory.

Guo Changcheng feels his eyes inexplicably well up.

The skeleton turns around to guard him carefully.

Just then, there's a sudden rumble like thunder, faint at first, but getting louder and louder. Guo Changcheng looks up at the sky to find that the stars and moon are gone, as if clouds had suddenly appeared. But there's no lightning. Only then does he realise that the 'thunder' comes from below.

All the skeletons, including those still clinging to that strange young man, calm down. Their teeth are chattering in a strange harmony, as if they knew how to be afraid and were trembling.

Even the demon beasts stop moving, lying in various positions with their ears plastered to the ground, listening for something.

Chu Shuzhi has no idea what's happening but he has a bad feeling about it. Decisive in battle, he's quick to fight or run without hesitation—now he flies down from the wall and grabs Guo Changcheng's collar. Guo Changcheng's vision blurs as he finds himself dragged along by Chu Shuzhi 'flying' just above the ground.

Then suddenly Chu Shuzhi bounds up onto a roof, his speed raising a biting cold air stream. Guo Changcheng can't resist looking down and immediately sees why Chu Shuzhi has jumped up to the roof—the whole ground seems to have turned into a huge methane pool, so dark he can't see the bottom. Large cracks have split the ground, and a thick black gas comes surging out.



Suddenly, the young man rips open his human skin and a huge monster bursts out. With him as their leader, all the beasts start howling at the sky.

Chu Shuzhi doesn't even look back. Without pausing for breath, he rushes all the way to the town gate with Guo Changcheng in tow. He finds their parked car, pulls open the door and practically throws Guo Changcheng inside. His foot is on the accelerator before the door is completely shut, and he speeds away so fast they're pressed into their seats.

"Just now," Guo Changcheng says, "what was that just now?"

Quietly, Chu Shuzhi says, "I don't know."

Guo Changcheng is confused. "Then why are we running?"

Chu Shuzhi is still flooring it, as if he wanted to turn the car into a plane. Guo Changcheng feels like the wheels have already left the ground. He hears his Chu-ge say coldly, "If we hadn't run, we'd not see another sunrise, idiot."

"Then what about Chief Zhao and the others?" Guo Changcheng says with wide eyes.

Chu Shuzhi frowns. "Give them a call."

Guo Changcheng fumbles his phone from his satchel and looks at it. "There's no signal."

Chu Shuzhi's frown deepens.

"But which way are we running? Where are we going?"

Chu Shuzhi yanks the steering wheel into a sharp turn, the wheels of the car screeching harshly. "Up into the mountains. The higher the better."

The resort town was originally built to take advantage of the mountain scenery and the hot springs in the mountains. They're at the foot of the mountains towering about a thousand metres above them. Fortunately, this is a well-developed tourist attraction, and the infrastructure for cars heading into the mountains is good. However, for safety reasons, the roads are closed at night.

Chu Shuzhi floors the accelerator and crashes straight into the safety barrier blocking the road, sending it flying. He drives the car recklessly up the mountain—when fleeing for his life, his instinct seems to be to seek high ground. After calming down for a bit, Chu Shuzhi remembers that when Mount Buzhou collapsed, all the tribes also went up some sacred mountain to seek shelter.

The memory of only a few words from the ancient myths seems to be guiding him in the dark.

Guo Changcheng looks out of the car window. In the resort town at the foot of the mountain, not a single light is on; it seems like a gaping mouth ready to swallow everything. For a moment, his vision blurs—it's starting to rain.

He doesn't know if he's just being hypersensitive, but within the pitter-patter of the rain, he hears an indescribable roar, deeply vicious and chilling to the bone. He can't help shuddering violently.

It takes Chu Shuzhi around half an hour to drive up the mountain. Cars can't go all the way to the summit; there's only a small path hewn out of the rock, and behind it, a small suspension bridge that looks extremely dangerous. There are guardrails, but even so it looks quite treacherous in the rainy weather. Above it is a stalactite cave, in normal times inundated with tourists.

There's nobody on duty up there at night. Chu Shuzhi says, "Take your electric baton. In the trunk there's also water and food - take along however much you can. There should also be one of Chief Zhao's spare lighters. Find it and take it, and then let's go!"

The two of them take off their coats and put them over their heads, grab their equipment, then rush along the stone walkway towards the stalactite cave as fast as they can. Only then does Guo Changcheng find time to breathe. He looks down and finds that below the rickety rails is a thousand-metre cliff. Thinking of how he just ran across the shaking bridge with the speed of a 100-metre sprinter, his legs give way and he nearly collapses.

Chu Shuzhi takes out his mobile phone and realises he doesn't have a signal, either. They seem to be cut off from the world. He takes off his soaking wet shirt and sits down bare chested, waving away the food and water that Guo Changcheng passes him. With a dark expression, he stares outside. "It looks like something major has happened."

They take turns keeping watch through the night. Guo Changchang gets up at midnight, absolutely determined to relieve Chu Shuzhi. Chu Shuzhi doesn't mind either way, glances at the little electric baton that never leaves Guo Changcheng's hand, and silently leans back against the icy cold stone wall of the cave, relaxing with his eyes closed.

Guo Changcheng gathers his courage and sits upright and still, guarding the cave opening, grasping the electric baton with both hands.

Eventually he feels like it should be close to daybreak, but the sky shows no signs of brightening. Just then, the small whistle around Chu Shuzhi's neck, mute for a long time, sounds a few times at a medium volume. Guo Changcheng rubs his eyes hard and turns on his flashlight. He drips some more cow tears into his eyes and looks outside. Tossed by the wind and rain he sees a figure, looking like a young girl, dangling from the frail guardrails of the suspension bridge!

Chu Shuzhi has woken at the first sound of the whistle, and looks out of the cave, too. "Oh," he says, "a little ghost girl."

Guo Changcheng takes two steps forward and squints hard in that direction. "I know that girl. I saw her picture and the ID her family brought. They said she didn't come home at night after getting off work."

"Give me a bottle," Chu Shuzhi says. "You wait here."

With that, he grabs an empty soul-bottle and walks out. However, maybe it's because the Zombie King is essentially a demon and looks ferocious, the girl starts screaming in fright before he even gets close. "Don't come closer! Don't come closer!"

With her swaying movements, the guardrail creaks in the wind and rain and it looks like she's about to fall off.

Chu Shuzhi has no choice but to stop in his tracks—he doesn't know what the girl saw before she died, but it clearly can't be a good memory for her ghost to be startled so easily.

Chu Shuzhi turns and gives Guo Changcheng a meaningful look. Guo Changcheng carefully walks along the suspension bridge, which is treacherous and slippery from the rain. It only supports a single person crossing at a time. Although neither are fat, Chu Shuzhi feels the suspension bridge trembling and shaking nonstop under Guo Changcheng's footsteps.

Guo Changcheng squeezes past him with difficulty, even though Chu Shuzhi is leaning away so most of his body is already over the edge of the bridge. He takes the small bottle from Chu Shuzhi and cautiously approaches the girl dangling in midair. Wiping rain off his face, he says as gently as possible, "Girl, don't be afraid. We're cops. Let go and come to me. We'll send you back, ok?"

Talking softly, Guo Changcheng negotiates with the frightened girl for a long time in the wind and the rain. He's soaked from head to toe. Finally, the girl lets down her guard a little and reluctantly accepts that she's dead. She looks at the bottle in Guo Changcheng's hand and carefully climbs towards him.

Just then a sudden roar comes from the other side of the bridge. The girl screams and clings tightly to the cold iron guardrail. All the hair on Guo Changcheng's body stands on end. Chu Shuzhi far away makes a calming gesture, then quickly moves his hands as if pulling a bow, and the raindrops in the air coalesce into a small bow. Unhurriedly, Chu Shuzhi produces a yellow lightning talisman used for exorcising evil between his fingers, rolls it into the shape of an arrow, nocks it on the bowstring, and aims.

Just before the arrow can leave the bowstring, the bridge sways unnaturally. Chu Shuzhi pauses. He sees Guo Changcheng looking past him with a panic-stricken expression. An unbelievably rancid stench from beneath the Underworld drifts towards him on the wind.

At last, the Zombie King breaks into a cold sweat.

~~~

Meanwhile, in the Underworld, the Ghost Face has suddenly self-destructed, to Shen Wei's absolute unadulterated shock. He reaches out to wrap Zhao Yunlan in his arms and shouts, "Get down!"

Zhao Yunlan feels a violent pain in his heart, as if a needle had been stabbed into it. For a moment, his hands and feet go numb.

Then, with a deafening sound, the water of the River of Forgetfulness shoots up hundreds of metres, forming a towering wall. It hovers there for a moment, then crashes down like a tsunami, creating a gigantic whirlpool. Those who managed to react fast enough have flown up to the high hanging Halls of the Ten Kings; the rest have been swept into the inky black waters of the River of

Forgetfulness. Roaring, thundering sounds ring out one after another.

In quick succession, the entire Underworld Road, the bridge, and even the Ten Halls all break apart and disintegrate.

The three of them start running out of the Underworld, Shen Wei hurrying them along. Only Zhao Yunlan pauses, clutching his chest. With some hesitation, he says, “Zhu Hong...?”

Shen Wei pushes him forward. “Don’t worry, she won’t die. I gave her a twig from the Holy Tree.”

They retreat all the way beyond the Ghost City, until they come to the big pagoda tree that connects yin and yang in Antique Street in Dragon City. With a “meow”, a black shadow rushes head-first into Zhao Yunlan’s arms.

“Fat fuck, what are you doing here?” Zhao Yunlan says.

Da Qing answers, “I searched for you all over the world! You heartless rascal! I almost turned over the whole Underworld. What happened there just now ...did a gas tank explode? Dog me, it scared this cat to death!”

Before Zhao Yunlan can answer, Shen Wei picks up both man and cat and throws them towards the big pagoda tree: “Now isn’t the time to catch up. Hurry up there!” The last few words are shouted at Lin Jing who’s following them quickly.

Shen Wei brings up the rear. His hands start shaping ancient and complex gestures, and he throws out three spells in a row. The black shadow that has been following them out stops abruptly, as if it hit an invisible wall, unable to move any farther. Shen Wei backs up a few steps and leans heavily against the big pagoda tree. He’s gasping for breath and his temples are glistening with cold sweat.

Someone calls him from above. “Shen Wei!”

Only then does he turn around with difficulty and climb up.

Underground, the black shadow washes over the invisible seal again and again, like turbulent river water obstructed by silt—each wave producing a loud, earth-shattering noise.

As soon as Shen Wei’s head emerges, Zhao Yunlan grabs his hand and pulls him up.

Shen Wei leans on him; it takes him a while to catch his breath. He opens his eyes and sees a surprisingly lively scene under the big pagoda tree. In addition to Da Qing, many more SIU employees have arrived: Wang Zheng, Sang Zan, and a big group of night shift workers, including the receptionist Lao Wu, and even Lao Li from the day shift.

Lao Li is clutching a big bone, presumably to use as a weapon.

Even the old man guarding the big pagoda tree emerges from his small store in the distance, watching them from the door threshold.

Suddenly, tyres squealing, Zhao Yunlan’s father drives his car straight into the pedestrian street, comes to a stop on the narrow curb, and steps out—no, this isn’t his mortal biological father... it’s actually Shennong’s medicine bowl.

The first thing Shennong’s bowl says causes a big stir: “Is the Great Seal completely broken?”

Chapter 105

The hand Zhao Yunlan is using to support Shen Wei tightens abruptly.

Under everyone's nervous and confused gazes, Shen Wei finally nods.

"The Ghost King used himself as a medium to leak the chaos. I used three old spells from the Houtu Great Seal to block it underground." He continues, "In addition, the resort town has been split wide open by the Soul Slashing Blade. It may leak a little right now, but it should not be too serious."

"Nüwa has been dissipating for thousands of years, and those old spells on the Houtu Great Seal have limited power. How long can you block it?"

"Half a day at most."

The crowd is dead silent. Wang Zheng asks quietly, "What's the Houtu Great Seal?"

Sang Zan gives her a gentle tug and puts a finger on his lips to tell her not to ask more. He himself doesn't understand everything they're saying, but because he helped Zhao Yunlan look for the *Record of Ancient Secrets*, he has heard some fragments of the story and has by now guessed a good portion of it.

Shennong's medicine bowl stares intently at Shen Wei, continuing to question him. "So what are you going to do, Immortal?"

Shen Wei meets his gaze calmly, turns his hand to grasp Zhao Yunlan's, and says serenely, "I will do as I promised back then."

Shennong's medicine bowl is stunned by his calm and frank attitude. When his gaze falls on their clasped hands, several expressions flit across his face, but reveal nothing in the end. He averts his eyes, and asks in a somewhat unnatural voice, "What can I do for you?"

Shen Wei's gaze sweeps across every person and ghost present. He says evenly, "Back then, Lord Kunlun used the Four Mystical Artefacts to seal the four sky pillars. When the Great Seal weakened, the Artefacts were seized by force and reappeared in the human world, but they are all in my hands again now. I need to reseal the four pillars that hold up the sky... and I hope everyone can help me hold the formation."

As he speaks, a huge square Eight Trigrams array appears above Antique Street—its four corners are aligned with the cardinal directions represented by the Four Auspicious Beasts²³⁸.

The slender Awl of Mountains and Rivers jumps out of Shen Wei's hands first, turning, growing taller and longer, towering thousands of metres above them like a majestic cliff on a snowy mountain, and darts down onto the Black Tortoise signifying north. With a deafening noise, the round disk of the Sundial breaks away from the Awl and whirls towards the White Tiger in the west. The Ink Brush of Virtue cut from the Holy Tree points its tip towards the sky and arcs onto the Azure Dragon denoting east. Last is the wickless Lantern of the Guardian. Although still unlit, it follows Shen Wei's guidance to descend on the Vermillion Bird standing for south.

"Hey, wait, wait!" Zhao Yunlan puts in. "Isn't the Lantern of the Guardian in the Underworld Court?"

Shen Wei explains, "I delayed for a moment earlier and brought it along. The one in the Court is a smokescreen."

He does seem a little abashed for simply having swiped the Lantern, and lowers his head slightly. "These are extraordinary times... but

my method was inappropriate. I am ashamed.”

Zhao Yunlan is lost for words.

Shen Wei lifts Zhao Yunlan’s hand and says softly, “It’ll hurt a little.”

Zhao Yunlan feels a prick in his fingertip, drawing a perfectly round bead of blood which flies directly into the Lantern of the Guardian, stretching into a very thin line.

Next, Shen Wei takes the little pendant off his neck, the one he never before removed on any account. He opens its top and gently pours out a little of its contents. A tiny cluster of sparks flies from his fingertips, landing right on the slender wick made of blood. A faint glow like a firefly’s rises within the lamp.

Shen Wei lowers his head and sucks Zhao Yunlan’s pricked finger into his mouth.

“Wait, that’s it?” Zhao Yunlan says. “Didn’t that King say he wanted to draw a tube of blood from my heart?”

“The fingers are linked to the heart,” Shen Wei says. “The Lantern wick has been lost for ages. The Underworld wants a magic weapon that can guarantee peace, so they want to keep the Lantern of the Guardian burning for thousands of years to come. I only need half a day to reseal the four pillars. One drop is enough.”

Having said that, Shen Wei raises his head and addresses the crowd. “Lord Kunlun, the mountain sage, sealed the four pillars. Although I inherited the thirty-six mountains and rivers, I was born filthy and cannot connect with the Four Mystical Artefacts.”

He reveals his original appearance—long hair flowing down, his inborn demonic aura mixing paradoxically with his gentlemanly bearing. He’s indescribably, incomparably magnificent.

Nobody can refuse him.

Wang Zheng and Sang Zan look at each other, then walk side by side to stand underneath the Awl of Mountains and Rivers. Da Qing takes the golden bell on his neck into his mouth and walks towards the Ink Brush of Virtue. Lao Li, carrying his big bone stick, looks this way and that, finally hangs a charred fried fish from the bone, and follows Da Qing in silence. Lin Jing takes out a 108-bead necklace and stands still underneath the Sundial of Reincarnation.

Just as Shennong's medicine bowl is walking past him, Zhao Yunlan speaks up. "Hey, you there."

Occupying Zhao Yunlan's father's body, Shennong's medicine bowl turns around. "You there?"

After a moment's hesitation, Zhao Yunlan says, "Stop taking advantage of me already, do you really think you're my dad?! Come here, I'd like to have a word with you."

Shennong's medicine bowl smiles helplessly and steps aside with Zhao Yunlan. "Please speak, Lord Kunlun."

Zhao Yunlan leans against the big pagoda tree and looks down. All seems calm beneath the tree, not at all like something extraordinary is being suppressed... and only for half a day. His cigarette pack is empty, so he reaches over and pulls a pack out of Father Zhao's pocket. Unceremoniously, he takes out a cigarette and lights up.

After a short silence he speaks. "Actually there's something I wanted to ask of you."

Shennong's medicine bowl whispers, "Oh no."

"Oh yes," Zhao Yunlan says. "I'm my parents' only son. I would've liked to support them in their old age, and give them a proper burial. I didn't think I'd run out of time. But even if I'm out of time, I don't want

them to have to see their own child die before them. Think of a way for me.”

Shennong's medicine bowl is silent for a while. “Lord Kunlun... I don't really understand what you mean.”

“Don't act dumb,” says Zhao Yunlan. “It looks like you understand very well.”

Shennong's medicine bowl gives him a profound look: “So ultimately, it's only because you promised to live and die with him that the Ghost Slayer can honour his agreement without objection?”

“Bullshit.” Zhao Yunlan sweeps a glance over him, carelessly puffing out a smoke ring. “These things are unrelated. Do you think I'd sell myself just like that?”

Shennong's medicine bowl realises he's been indiscreet, lowers his head and after a while merely says, “I see.”

Zhao Yunlan stares him down. Finally, Shennong's medicine bowl says haltingly, “Lord Kunlun... if you die, I'll leave your father's body and live as ‘Zhao Yunlan’ for you. Mountain Sage, please don't worry.”

“Live well. Live like ‘Zhao Yunlan’.” Zhao Yunlan smacks his dad's shoulder improperly hard. “Enjoy what you should enjoy, do what you should do. I thank you.”

He takes two deep drags of his cigarette before twisting it out only half-smoked. He turns away, finally letting Shennong's medicine bowl pass to join Lin Jing at the Sundial of Reincarnation.

Zhao Yunlan stands alone beneath the Guardian Lantern.

He strokes it softly. Its inscription, unevenly carved into the lamp body, repeats the words on the Guardian Order Token. It's an odd

feeling – this lantern really does seem connected to his flesh and blood, its pulsing miraculously matching his heartbeat, as if there were two people standing here: him from millennia ago, and present him, absolutely identical.

Unimaginable regret rises within Zhao Yunlan. Changeable like clouds, the primordial lands have turned into cultivated fields, and the world has changed beyond recognition, turning round and round—yet he's like a tortoise thousands of years old, and hasn't changed at all. This is even more than faithfulness until death.

Shen Wei turns to look at the shopkeeper who's been guarding the dividing line between yin and yang. He's standing with the team of night shift personnel from No. 4 Bright Avenue, and together they form a circle all around the large array. The wrinkled man humbly brings his fists together like those in ancient times, and salutes Shen Wei. "This old fool's only use is to protect Buddha's law for you, Immortal One."

Shen Wei nods; then he lifts a finger and, stroke by stroke, writes in the air—ancient characters from the age of gods and demons. They in themselves seem to have power, floating through the air like waves. Every stroke carries with it the sound of ancient skies. Next, he holds his hands next to each other and slams his flattened palms heavily against the entire text. The strokes shatter and fly toward the four corners of the Eight Trigram array, landing on the foreheads of each person standing there.

In a flash, everyone can hear the incantation passed down from the dawn of time, incomparably profound. People can't help but feel the urge to bow down in spontaneous worship.

Finally, Shen Wei glances to the south, just in time for his gaze to meet Zhao Yunlan's. He suddenly smiles brightly, like spring flowers bursting into bloom.

~~~

In the pitch darkness of the Halls of the Underworld Court, Zhu Hong can't see anything; she's wandering around blindly. Only the twig of the Holy Tree Shen Wei gave her provides a faint white light. It creates an invisible protective bubble around her, isolating her from the terrible ghost tribe and the all-consuming chaos outside. At the same time, the seemingly delicate buds grow greener and greener.

Suddenly she hears someone anxiously calling her name. She turns and sees Fourth Uncle Snake leaning awkwardly against a crevice in the Hall of the Ten Kings, carefully hiding under a huge scale—Zhu Hong recognizes it as the Fuxi scale, one of the sacred relics of the Snake Tribe.

He seems to be gravely injured, unable even to preserve his human shape and revealing his dark green snake tail.

Seeing her, Fourth Uncle Snake is shocked at first, then he turns fierce. "Why are you here? Why didn't you leave with his Lordship earlier? Are you tired of your little life?"

He glances at the situation outside and darts out of his crevice. His long tail wraps around Zhu Hong and he pulls her inside. He turns to Zhu Hong, blood staining the corner of his mouth, his face white with anger. "There's no other child in this tribe as ignorant as you. Don't you get how dangerous this is, stupid girl? Don't you know to run?"

Zhu Hong says, "I was worried about you..."

Fourth Uncle Snake cuts her off coldly. "You're a little imp who can't even transform properly. It's not your place to worry about me."

Saying this, he gives her a full-body once-over. Seeing that she's unhurt, without even a scratch, he finally relaxes and snorts coldly. "Your luck is good."

Zhu Hong holds up the twig from the Holy Tree. “The Lord Ghost Slayer gave this to me.”

Fourth Uncle Snake squints. “The Holy Tree? How can he just give that away? What did he say to you?”

“He said that if these two buds survive, I should find a good place to plant them.”

Hearing this, Fourth Uncle Snake’s thoughts spin. Suddenly he slumps heavily against the stone wall of the Underworld Court, frowning deeply. “So the Great Seal really will break, and he’s now taking care of the aftermath...Could it be broken already?”

Zhu Hong is very confused and doesn’t dare interrupt his thoughts. She just has to stand there silently without asking questions. After a while, Fourth Uncle Snake says to her quietly, “Little girl, fortune favours fools—quick, put it away carefully.”

Zhu Hong immediately nods her agreement, then suddenly squeaks in surprise and holds the twig out to her uncle. “Quick, look.”

A light green colour has emerged from the finger-thick, coarse and withered twig at some point, revealing a delicate head—the twig that originally only had two buds grew a third one!

Astonished, Zhu Hong says, “What’s going on? Shen Wei said that, in many thousands of years, that twig has only ever grown these two buds.”

“You get to call him ‘Shen Wei’?” Fourth Uncle Snake gives her a look, then continues after a moment, “Kunlun’s Holy Tree lasts as long as heaven and earth; it’s the beginning of all life. Back then, Nüwa borrowed a twig of the Holy Tree to plant at the gate to the Profane Lands. Her intentions were murderous, and thus it resulted in a tree that never yet lived but was dead. Now this twig is sprouting

for no reason... perhaps it's because someone's intentions have changed."

Those two are relatively safe in this most dangerous of places. However, Guo Changcheng and Chu Shuzhi, dangling from the suspension bridge, are literally hanging on to life by a thread.

Chu Shuzhi makes a snap decision, and, not caring about the movements behind him, simply looses the bow. The spinning talisman triggers a thunderbolt, which crashes down, splitting the sky, piercing through the ghost next to Guo Changcheng. Chu Shuzhi turns back quickly, and his arms, turned greenish-grey again, stir up a large curtain of rain. The water solidifies into a huge skeleton that swoops downward.

Only after turning does Chu Shuzhi realise that the thing behind him isn't a demon beast but that red-eyed monstrosity of a youth in human skin.

The red-eyed monster is a high-ranking member of the ghost tribe. After inhaling the chaos from the Profane Lands leaking out of cracks in the ground, the person... no, the ghost seems to have turned the situation to its own advantage and power-levelled. There were two Ghost Kings: one is already dead, the other has been turned into a demigod by an immortal's tendon. Now all the high-ranking ghosts are feverishly vying for the position, wanting to usurp the throne and become the new Ghost King.

The ghost who should've been trapped by Chu Shuzhi's skeleton now simply raises his arms and stands against it. With a pinch of his fingers, the skeleton once again scatters into water droplets, splashing everywhere.

Chu Shuzhi feels a strong blow hit his chest, sending his thin body flying straight off the suspension bridge; below him stretch thousands of metres of cliff face.



Guo Changcheng doesn't stop to think. He doesn't know where his courage comes from, or what he's even thinking, he just flips over the guardrail and jumps off the bridge as if suicidal, leaping towards Chu Shuzhi. The satchel that he was holding falls on the bridge surface, the soul-bottles scattering all over the place

Another dull rumble, like thunder, comes from underground.

~~~

The Four Mystical Artefacts are linked together by complex ancient spells. With Shen Wei at the centre, they gradually start circulating smoothly. Everyone anchoring the array can feel in their heart the connection between the Artefacts and the words Shen Wei inscribed on their foreheads—they can't help but silently recite those words that they can neither read nor understand.

Lao Li, holding the big bone, seems to be agitated by the ancient inscriptions. He looks down at the ridiculous, yet unspeakably solemn fat cat and listens to the ringing of its gently shaking bell. Suddenly, he whispers, “Three hundred years ago, there was a person with an incurable bone disease. When it flared up, living and dying were equally painful choices. Nowadays you'd probably call it bone cancer. The family quickly decided to burn incense, to beg the gods...”

Da Qing raises his head in shocked disbelief.

Grey-haired Lao Li reaches out a shaking hand to pet one more time the head he has petted countless times before. However, this time, Da Qing dodges him. The old man, who has always had a strange obsession with bones and who wasn't known too well at No. 4 Bright Avenue, suddenly seems to have aged ten years. His lips quiver. “They didn't manage to invite a god but a black cat who loved to eat fried fish. The person was terminally ill then, and unable to ever go out. Every day, he was utterly bored... so when he saw a living, breathing creature, he was thrilled. He treated this black cat as a

little friend sent by Heaven. Not being able to leave the courtyard, he just wished to live together with the little black cat.”

Lao Li’s eyes glisten, as if he’s about to cry, but his eyes are clouded and he can shed no tears. “But that person later discovered that the black cat wasn’t actually an ordinary cat, but a divine cat. It could communicate with yin and yang, and could travel between Heaven and Hell. One day, the black cat broke into the wine cellar, fell into a jar of wine, got drunk, and shared the secret of the golden bell around its neck. It said that the bell was bestowed by its former master, containing half of his primordial spirit inside. It could bring the dead back to life and reverse reincarnation... the person was dying and so scared of death, he was going crazy.”

Da Qing says coldly, “And so he cheated me out of my little bell. Thank you for your blessing, teaching me such a good lesson. This stupid cat realised only then what it meant to guard against others. I heard that in the end you died of old age and were buried outside Shanhai Pass. How was it to live those few more decades? Did it feel good?”

Lao Li says quietly, “Like a fishbone got stuck in my throat; like maggots were eating away at me.”

Da Qing turns his head. “Too bad. And what were you doing infiltrating the SIU? You’ve been an undercover agent for decades. You used to be a scholar, don’t you feel bad working for us as a gatekeeper and doing odd jobs? I only got my bell back recently... The year you joined up, I had nothing left for you to scheme for, right?”

Suddenly Lao Li kneels down. Reincarnated three hundred years later, he still carries with him the poison buried in the bones of that life. Guarding the doorway of No. 4 Bright Avenue as an inconspicuous doorman, he always looked forward to the end of his workday when he would feed a few of the little crispy fried yellow fish

to the black cat, who was becoming more and more portly. He thought his lifetime would be lived out like this and the next lifetime the same, but with the Ink Brush of Virtue suspended overhead, lining up every bit and piece of his past... it just all boils over in his heart, like an explosion.

Lao Li's tears finally fall. As if the silent Ink Brush of Virtue had heard something, it suddenly moves, slowly turning in a semi-circle to reveal its red and black tip.

The Four Auspicious Beasts answer as one—

Wood brings forth fire: the Lantern of the Guardian suddenly blazes brightly.

Fire brings forth gold: the shadow on the Sundial of Reincarnation slowly moves on its own, without the sun.

Gold brings forth water: the veins on the Awl of Mountains and Rivers start to flow like living things.

The earth is quaking, and the three old spells on the Houtu Great Seal finally break. Fathoms and fathoms of vicious currents from deep below the Seal emerge, ready to engulf the whole world. The bright lamps and fires of all the cities and villages are extinguished; the light in the world of the living nothing but a frail mirage. One sweep of the north wind, and nothing will be left.

Finally, a calm and unhurried voice recites the sealing spell: "With the Three-Life Stone, seal the white mountains of the west."

Rock, not yet old but ravaged.

Lin Jing and Shennong's medicine bowl simultaneously get a hollow feeling in their stomachs, and then a written image of the teachings of Dharma and the essence of Shennong's followers floats up and

plunges into the Sundial of Reincarnation. The Sundial rapidly spins around thrice and fades away in midair.

A loud sound comes from the west, like a nail gauging many miles into the ground, producing a crack and forcing the black gas into it, actually absorbing most of the black shroud covering the earth.

“With the essence of mountains and rivers, seal the black waters of the north.”

Water, not yet cold but frozen.

“With the source of good and evil, seal the jade expanse of the east.”

Body, not yet lived but dead.

One by one, three of the Mystical Artefacts fade away within the Four Trigrams Array, until only the Lantern of the Guardian is left.

“With the soul of a god, seal the great fire of the south.”

The Array of Four Trigrams and Four Auspicious Beasts transforms completely: the Four Pillars rise as the Lantern of the Guardian moves to the centre. Zhao Yunlan feels the words pouring out of it like a torrent but he reacts too late—his connection to the Lantern has been severed.

Arms wrap around him from behind, embracing him, and he turns his head. Shen Wei, who snuck up behind him at some point, kisses him deeply that very instant.

It's a tender kiss, lingering on... until Zhao Yunlan feels something gushing fast from his heart. He struggles, violently—but Shen Wei's hand at the back of his head is like iron, unmovable. The pit of Zhao Yunlan's stomach turns ice-cold; from his first acquaintance with Shen Wei to their familiarity... every aspect of their history flashes before his eyes like flickering lights and passing shadows, and he

senses with utter clarity that a hand is ruthlessly erasing them, bit by bit.

Zhao Yunlan falls unconscious, and Shen Wei's whole body catches on fire. Only when his long hair and robes are swept up in the fire does he let go of Zhao Yunlan, shoving him and sending him flying through the air to land far away in the arms of Shennong's medicine bowl.

Shen Wei gazes at Zhao Yunlan intently... and is consumed at last by the inferno, never to be seen again.

It turns out that ultimately, his own hands have pushed away the person he struggled so hard to keep, no matter how.

It turns out that ultimately, he himself has broken the promise to live and die together, which he schemed so hard to gain.

'No death, no extinction, no godhood'—he really was innately stupid. Only at the end of the road, in this moment of life and death, in a flash he finally understands.

And somehow, unexpectedly, he's relieved. Finally, suddenly, he feels that he's 'worthy of him'.

However... he'll never see him again.

Chapter 106

A huge earthquake rocks the surface; in the Underworld, the shock is even worse.

Fourth Uncle Snake shields Zhu Hong resolutely, as if she's still a spoiled young snake wrapped around his wrist. Iron-hard scales under his skin protect her from the rocks and sand falling everywhere.

The Underworld takes a long time to calm. The thick, black gas that made everyone disoriented miraculously dissipates. Weary survivors stick their heads out from various corners and carefully examine their surroundings.

Quietly, Zhu Hong asks, "Fourth Uncle, what's up?"

"Shush," says Fourth Uncle Snake, and sends out his divine intuition to cautiously scan their surroundings.

Suddenly, Zhu Hong squeaks. Fourth Uncle Snake turns to see that the twig of the Holy Tree, which had inexplicably grown a third bud, has begun to drift out of her hands. Zhu Hong immediately wants to snatch it back, but Fourth Uncle Snake grabs her. "Wait, what are you going to do?"

Anxiously Zhu Hong says, "Shen Wei saved my life. I promised him that I'd find a place to plant it. How could I lose a twig of the Holy Tree?"

With this, she breaks free of Fourth Uncle Snake's hold, and with the recklessness of youth,²³⁹ she starts running. Being only a few hundred years old, she's ignorant; she's never heard of this 'Houtu Great Seal' and doesn't know to be afraid.

For a moment, Fourth Uncle Snake hesitates, but he's too worried. Reluctantly, he manifests his legs and runs after her.

The twig from the Holy Tree has flown straight to the River of Forgetfulness. The black gas above the surface has dissipated, revealing the deep, serene, and icy cold waters of the River of Forgetfulness. For a moment, the twig hovers in the air; then it dives straight down..

Instinctively, Zhu Hong is afraid of the River, but she remembers her promise. After the shortest pause, she steels herself, shifts into python shape and with a 'poof', also dives down. Fourth Uncle Snake directly follows her.

To others, it looks like the two snakes are just throwing away their lives. Although the water is oddly quiet for now, the state at the Great Seal is unknown, and a new round of eruptions is surely brewing. Jumping down now... isn't that suicidal?

Zhu Hong and Fourth Uncle Snake follow the twig of the Holy Tree as it sinks all the way down. Suddenly Fourth Uncle's eyes flash; he has seen so much already that he has a hunch—the direction that the twig is sinking is straight towards the legendary Ancient Tree of Virtue.

Sure enough, not long after, they see the lofty and withered Ancient Tree of Virtue. After being motionless for millions of years, it suddenly stretches out its dried branches, letting them slowly undulate up and down as if greeting something, thereby gently stirring the waters of the River of Forgetfulness.

The twig from the Holy Tree lands beside the Ancient Tree of Virtue, plunging into the deepest part of the soil.

There, it roots, then sprouts, growing branches and leaves so fast the naked eye can see it. Soon, it stands tall, covered in a rich canopy; a sharp contrast to the Ancient Tree of Virtue next to it.

Then it stretches out a soft and slender shoot, and gently wraps it around the long-dead and withered Ancient Tree of Virtue. Zhu Hong covers her mouth in astonishment—tiny soft shoots start growing on that dead wood!

The two giant trees grow thicker and taller, upwards, on and on, until they break the churning surface of the River of Forgetfulness. Their green shade obscures the broken ruins of the Halls of the Underworld Court and even then they continue to flourish. Looking from afar, the canopy is rolling on, dense and furious, farther than the eye can see.

Beneath the tree, Fourth Uncle Snake's wounds heal miraculously. He finally lands behind the Ancient Tree of Virtue—the stone marker of the Houtu Great Seal seems to be gone.

The Houtu Great Seal disintegrates, and the ground, saturated with black gas and the sounds of the ghost tribe, suddenly catches on fire in blazing flames. The Four Pillars return to their original positions—maybe a new Great Seal will soon be completed; maybe...

Above ground, Wang Zheng suddenly mutters, "What's... that sound?"

"Mountains." Shennong's medicine bowl listens for a moment. "The sound of ten thousand mountains crying together."

Wang Zheng's eyes widen. "Mountains can cry, too?"

Shennong's bowl is briefly silent. "They can. Legend says all the mountains cried together only when Pangu fell. Not even when Kunlun's body became the Lantern of the Guardian was there a sound like this, probably because then, it wasn't really a complete extinguishment of body and soul."

Wang Zheng stands frozen, until she finally reacts to what he's implying. She hasn't had much interaction with either Shen Wei or the Ghost Slayer, but by the time she unfreezes, she's already in tears, to her own surprise—she knows ghosts can't easily cry, but she just can't stop.

Sang Zan sighs and reaches out to hug her.

Right then a familiar voice says softly, “Silly girl, what’s with the crying?”

Wang Zheng looks down in shock. Zhao Yunlan has opened his eyes and slowly gets to his feet.

Wang Zheng meets his eyes, and suddenly feels there's something very strange; that’s definitely Chief Zhao, with whom she's interacted daily, but there's... some indescribable change.

Her heart seizes up—did Shen Wei really take all his memories?

For a moment, Shennong’s bowl looks him up and down in bewilderment, then he takes three quick steps back, slowly kneels down and with the utmost respect performs a greeting. “I pay my respects to the Mountain God.”

Zhao Yunlan... Kunlun puts his hands behind his back and dismisses him with a casual wave.

The scene seems to be blurring before Wang Zheng's eyes; the man wearing a wrinkled windbreaker is suddenly in long-sleeved, belted green robes; a glimpse of the man from ancient times, thousands of years ago.

Shennong’s medicine bowl says quietly, “My master forcefully suppressed the Mountain God's primordial essence. When he sent you into the wheel of reincarnation, he entered into a contract with the immortal Ghost Slayer. He decreed that for generation after

generation, the Ghost Slayer must live or die with the Great Seal. Now, with disaster befalling the human world and the Houtu Great Seal breaking, the Ghost Slayer has sacrificed himself for the Great Seal, so all karmic debt has been settled."

The blazing inferno has turned a warm orange, the flames reflecting in Kunlun's eyes. He remains silent for a long time and finally, softly, says, "I know."

Shennong's bowl continues, "The Ghost Slayer was a Ghost King who ascended to godhood, seeking virtue and acquiring it, and right at the end he erased your—"

"All right, enough said." Kunlun doesn't turn back, sadness colouring his handsome face. "I know all that."

Shennong's medicine bowl respectfully bows his head in response. After quite a while, he says, "When my master departed this world, he ordered me to oversee the contract between him and the Ghost Slayer. I can now humbly retire with merit gained."

Kunlun ignores him, but spreads open both hands. They hold the snake scale Nüwa left behind, which once sustained a small eleven-year reincarnation wheel. Kunlun whispers to himself, "Shennong, what exactly are you trying to tell me?"

Just then, a faint tremor comes from underground. Everyone startles, but all they can see is the soil beneath them loosening. Then suddenly, the top of a giant tree breaks through the earth, its branches flourishing and green, and glistening as if the leaves bore dew from another world. It drips on the ground, and the cracks in the earth caused by the Great Seal shattering gradually close up again.

What is permanence?

Why should there be good and evil, right and wrong?

What is life? And what is death?

Kunlun's slight frown finally fades a little. He reaches out with a hand just in time to catch a falling leaf.

Suddenly, he asks, "You were the one who transferred Guo Changcheng to the SIU?"

Shennong's bowl says respectfully, "Yes. When my Master was alive, he ordered me to look for a person unable to see the supernatural, but able to perceive truth fully; a nobody who nevertheless bears great merit from Heaven."

"So that's how it is." Kunlun sighs softly. "I see. Thank you very much."

In an instant, Nüwa's snake scale crumbles to dust in his palm.

Da Qing finally has to ask. "Just what is going on?"

Kunlun sits down cross-legged beneath the Lantern of the Guardian and softly pets the black cat's head. "Don't worry. The Lantern is still lit."

With that, he closes his eyes calmly, as if in meditation, sitting like an ancient silent statue of a god. The great Lantern behind him is burning with a tiny flame.

~~~

Guo Changcheng's little electric baton isn't responding; he has no time to be scared or terrified, his mind is blank. All he can see is the falling Chu Shuzhi.

He reaches out desperately with both hands, grabs Chu Shuzhi's arm, and squeezes his eyes shut, listening to the howling mountain winds roaring past his ears.

And then, he finds his body has stopped falling.

He opens his eyes, astonished, to realise that when he fell, he accidentally jostled the satchel Chu Shuzhi gave him, and the soul-bottles all fell out. Their lids crashed onto the guardrails and shattered, and all the souls gathered inside rushed out.

They don't look human; just like in the bottles, they're a streaming mass of light. There's the girl on the bridge, and the spirits of half a dozen people have linked with her to form a large net spreading down from the suspension bridge, narrowly catching both of them inside it.

Chu Shuzhi is thoroughly startled, but he knows there's no time to waste. He thanks them quietly, and picks up Guo Changcheng at once. Pushing lightly against the soul net, he leaps up, alighting on the guardrails first and then quickly stepping down onto the suspension bridge. He turns to push Guo Changcheng towards the cave entrance behind him, then tosses out twelve talismans in succession, pelting the red-eyed ghosts surrounding them. Thunder and lightning descend from the highest of heavens, turning the suspension bridge into a high voltage electric fence.

In the background, the souls that formed a net turn into a string of light spots, circling Guo Changcheng. The unremarkable young man's body suddenly shines with a faint orange glow, like the warm light of a fire. The souls around him seem to sense something and draw close.

Some inner voice makes Guo Changcheng blurt out: "G-g-guard the souls of the living, pacify the hearts of the dead..."

A ray of light appears from far away. In the boundless darkness of the earth, it starts out very faint, but burns wider and wider. Finally, it spreads beyond where eyes can see, covering the whole earth.

The red-eyed ghosts, who have gained the upper hand and almost forced Chu Shuzhi back onto the suspension bridge, suddenly scream, covering their eyes and backing away. They drop to sit on the swaying bridge, twisting and shrivelling, until finally they're roasted alive by the scorching light.

Shocked, Chu Shuzhi turns towards Guo Changcheng. Just then he has an illusion that Guo Changcheng has become a cluster of flames, flickering in time with the magic flames that span the earth.

The Zombie King, a bit worried, strides over and tentatively puts his hand into the flames pulsing on Guo Changcheng's body, but to his surprise, the temperature inside isn't scorching at all.

Unable to see the flames, Guo Changcheng blankly recites the last half, following that inner voice: "...pardon the crimes of those who are trapped, turn the wheel for those who are reincarnating."

His voice seems to merge with something from the boundless earth, resonating and reverberating throughout the world. Feeling something, Chu Shuzhi looks up. He sees the souls of those who died in the resort town, the ones that they've been looking for all night but couldn't completely gather, drifting up from the foot of the mountain one by one to float towards Guo Changcheng.

Guo Changcheng's notebook has a detailed record of every family's description of their missing persons, as well as the names of each of the town's property owners, their age, physical features, and so on.

The souls line up to find their own pages. Some lift a pen to write 'give so-and-so a message' on the side; some see their names written in a clumsy child's hand and seem to let go of their worries.

Finally, one by one, they disappear into the air, turning into countless dots of light and flying towards the sky.

The sound of spring thunder reverberates from the ends of the earth, and the dark cloud cover starts breaking up in places, revealing hints of sky. Then, from due south, two massive trees break through the ground, outgrowing houses, outgrowing high-rise buildings... even outgrowing the great mountains.

The souls gathered around Guo Changcheng have largely gone; only one remains, landing on the ground and showing itself to be the courier Feng Dawei.

“Thank you both!” he calls out to Chu Shuzhi and Guo Changcheng excitedly, “I’m convinced there’s a next life! When I’m born again, I’ll once again be my parents’ son and my brother’s brother. I’ll spend my time well, live well, and do more good to make up for this life.”

As he speaks, his soul becomes more and more transparent, until it, too, scatters into dots of light and finally drifts into the endless cycle of reincarnation.

The light on Guo Changcheng’s body flares high, then swiftly breaks away from his body, flying off into the distance like a shooting star.

The Great Mountain God sitting at the foot of the Lantern of the Guardian suddenly opens his eyes. A ball of fire, bright as the morning sun, drops into the Lantern and the tiny flame erupts into a blaze a hundred metres high.

Kunlun rises. His hands, pressed to the Lantern of the Guardian, shine orange from the firelight. His back turned to the others, he gazes at the Lantern in nervous anticipation.

Gradually, a human figure takes shape inside the burning Lantern, erupting out of the flames and landing directly in Kunlun’s arms. He isn’t heavy at all, but Kunlun looks as if catching him takes all his strength. He staggers back, and they fall to the ground together in a tangle.

Lin Jing squeaks quietly. "Professor Shen!"

The calm expression that Kunlun has been trying so hard to maintain finally cracks. The knuckles of his fingers are deathly white where he clutches Shen Wei.

As if choking on something, Shen Wei coughs delicately a few times. Unconsciously, he tilts his head to the side and leans it against Kunlun, his faint breath stirring against Kunlun's neck.

Three flames lick lightly on the space between Shen Wei's brows and on both his shoulders, then sink into his body and become invisible.

"Is that... soulfire?" Shennong's bowl says, stunned. "The soulless demon has spawned a real soul? The ghost tribe also have souls? Then the Great Seal... why does the Great Seal still exist?"

"The Great Seal is gone, can't you feel it?" Kunlun presses a gentle kiss to Shen Wei's brow. "The Ghost King has ascended to sagehood and obtained a soul. Shennong's dearest wish has finally been fulfilled; millennia after his death, the all-encompassing wheel of reincarnation he's been longing for is complete."

"But that's impossible!" Shennong's bowl says incredulously. "The Three Corpses in humans originate from the Profane Lands—what about the vicious currents deep underground? If we let them come into the world, won't the war between gods and demons just start over?"

One of Shen Wei's hands is still tightly clenched; it seems to contain something. Kunlun takes hold of it gently and, as if recognizing a familiar feeling, Shen Wei slowly loosens his grip. A golden spirit-soothing talisman emerges from his palm and leaps towards Kunlun.

Suddenly, Kunlun laughs—it's the exact same talisman he himself had drawn on the back of Shen Wei's hand when they first met.

The spirit-soothing talisman flies straight into the Lantern of the Guardian; then the Lantern starts to rise slowly from the ground and heads south, where it finally plunges into the earth.

With this, the new Four Pillars are completed, but they no longer serve to suppress anything.

"You were the one who kept using Shennong's words to warn me," Kunlun says to Shennong's bowl. "You were the one who retrieved the Lantern's true wick." He stands up, holding Shen Wei carefully. "How do you not understand this, then? Guard the souls of the living, pacify the hearts of the dead—so long as the Lantern of the Guardian continues to burn, chaos, though it exists, will never rise in revolt."

As his voice falls away, the leafy canopy towering over the mountains disintegrates into countless drops of dew, scattering all over, reaching every last place on earth. The earth, devastated by the rupture of the Great Seal, regains its original appearance, innocuous tender green spring shoots sprouting everywhere. Ordinary humans won't even remember that this dark catastrophe ever happened.

Then the first rays of daylight pierce the black clouds—and it is dawn.

THE END

## **Extras**

### **Glossary**



Foxghost translated some terms differently than they were translated in the main novel - notes on the names in italics are also by foxghost. In order of appearance:

Zhao-chu - Chief Zhao

Land of Great Disrespect - Profane Lands

Divine Wood - twig of the Holy Tree

Zhenhun Lamp - Lantern of the Guardian

Zhenhun Ling - Guardian Order - *Zhen-hun can translate to Calm-Soul, or Guard-soul, but it's more than that. The word 鎮/zhen is like holding down a sheet of paper beneath a weight, and I don't want to water it down, so for the rest of this I'm just going to use Zhenhun, as is. When it's referred to as the Zhenhun-Ling, it's also a wooden plaque, and sometimes a paper and cinnabar copy. The 'Ling' part is ambiguous — it's the 'command' or 'authority.' Zhao Yunlan's title is Zhenhun Lingzhu, or "Master of the Zhenhun Token," but often only 'Lingzhu' is used, which can be translated to 'Lord.'*

Zhanhun-shi - Ghost Slayer - 斬魂使 *literally: cut-soul-person. I could call him "Soul Slayer" but a name is a name. Shi is an honorific, of sorts. In this case an occupational one.*

Kunlun-jun - Lord Kunlun - *Jun is an honorific tacked onto any man from a monarch to a scholar.*

Zhanhun blade - Soul Slashing Blade

Difu - Underworld

Shennong-bo - Shennong's medicine bowl

Special Investigation Department (S.I.D.) - Special Investigations Unit (SIU)

jiangshi - zombie

(She) Sishu - Fourth Uncle (Snake)

yao tribes - shifter tribes - 妖 / *Yao is generally translated to demon / monster, but in Chinese myth they're mostly 'ascended' souls, not evil by nature. They're not exactly 'beasts' either — you can have an ascended rock or a tree, and in the case of the being that possessed Yunlan's father, a god's medicine pot. They're all 'yao.'*

jieba - stutterer - *The word 結巴 / stammer is pronounced jiēbā. Daqing used to call Sangzan this, and when asked what it meant, Daqing replied that it's an honorific denoting respect. 潔扒 / jiébā was how Sangzan mispronounced the word for stammer. It doesn't mean anything.*

Bright-Mirror wristwatch - Revealing mirror

Unusual Ancient Legends - Record of Ancient Secrets

## Extra 1

*Translated by foxghost (all footnotes are translator's notes by foxghost)*

The afternoon sun slants into the room. In the corner, a humidifier sprays white mist. An overcoat lies discarded carelessly on the guest sofa, its folds turning into pleats, but its owner doesn't seem to care. It's inordinately quiet, and the only sounds are fingers tapping on a keyboard. Zhao Yunlan sits behind his desk wearing a pair of UV protection glasses, busy correcting a report.

The more he checks it over, the more his brows furrow.

Zhao Yunlan picks up the internal office phone and dials Criminal Investigation across the hall, and with an angry tone, he says, "Lin Jing, get in here."

Thirty seconds later, Lin Jing smoothly gets in there, snickering. "Leader, you called for me?"

Viciously, Zhao Yunlan tears into him. "Can you count how many incorrect words are in here? I don't even know what sort of proper work you all do from day to night that a report can be written like ... what are you doing?"

Lin Jing isn't in the mood to take a scolding at all; he's squeezing closer and stretching out an arm to adjust the angle of his camera, saying, "Come on, leader. Say cheezee —"

Zhao Yunlan wears no expression. "...Cheese your sister.<sup>240</sup>"

The camera makes a snapping sound and Lin Jing manages to take a photo of the two of them, and turns it around with too much enthusiasm to show Zhao Yunlan. Because of the odd angle and placement, and Lin Jing's face being so close to the camera, it resembles a giant flat cake, and behind him, Zhao Yunlan with his sour face looking like a haunted spirit.

"It worked!" Lin Jing is groundlessly happy. "I thought the chaos era gods can't be captured by mere mortal electronics, but I guess it's like with Teacher Shen<sup>241</sup> — you really are a human incarnation, right? Can you shift into your real immortal body at will? Ai. How about it — can you bring out your real body and take a picture with me?"

Zhao Yunlan says nothing.

Lin Jing says, "Just one."

Zhao Yunlan says, "Get out."

And as smoothly as he came, Lin Jing gets out.

The office is only calm for five minutes before someone else knocks. Zhu Hong comes in. "Zhao-chu, I want to take back my resignation."

Zhao Yunlan gestures at the shredder with his chin. "Already done."

"Oh." Zhu Hong pauses, and looking for an excuse to stay, states, "Since tomorrow is lunar 15th, I need to take a day off."

"Okay, I got it." Zhao Yunlan doesn't even bother looking up.

After a while, Zhu Hong is still sitting there unmoving, so Zhao Yunlan finally glances up at her. "Is there anything else?"

“I’m just a little curious.” Zhu Hong stretches forward a bit, lowering her voice to ask, “Why did the Divine Wood Shen Wei give me grow a third bud? And how did the other two grow?”

Going by Zhao Yunlan’s expression, it looks like he doesn’t want to answer, but after all Zhu Hong is a lady, and he’s always more polite to ladies; especially to the ones that had secretly loved him and he had mercilessly rejected.

“The first bud grew when he made the contract with Shennong, the second bud grew when he fulfilled his promise, the third bud grew when he decided to ...” Zhao Yunlan pauses, his expression darkening. Some time passes before he’s able to force himself to keep his temper in check, continuing to say, “The Wheel of Reincarnation couldn’t be established in the Land of Great Disrespect because the Ghost Tribe did not have souls. And the Divine Wood growing three buds represents the Ghost King gaining his three souls<sup>242</sup>. The Ghost King’s soul connected the Wheel of Reincarnation to the Land of Great Disrespect<sup>243</sup>, and thus the concept of ‘Ghost Tribe’ ceased to exist. Get it?”

Zhu Hong thinks for a second, “Maybe ... I guess I can understand it a little better. But where did the Ghost Tribe go?”

Zhao Yunlan waggles an eyebrow. “They’re nowhere, but they’re also everywhere.”

Zhu Hong says, “So ... like how the Zhenhun Lamp that burns forever is everywhere?”

Zhao Yunlan makes a hum of agreement.

Zhu Hong asks another, “Then what about you? Will you return to Kunlun Mountain? Does the Zhenhun Ling still exist?”

Her voice carries a rare hesitation, as if she now remembers just who is sitting in front of her.

“Not going back.” Zhao Yunlan says as he copies a file to a USB stick and tosses it to Zhu Hong. “Give it a red header, and then put our official seal on it — Kunlun Mountain doesn’t have the kind of soil for tree planting and agriculture, so even if I go back I can’t exactly open the place up for agritourism. Go back for what? How interesting is it to receive morning prayers from a bunch of idiots? I’m definitely not going.”<sup>244</sup>

Zhu Hong catches the USB stick. “It still feels rather like a dream.”

Zhao Yunlan makes an inquisitive noise.

Zhu Hong says, “I was once secretly in love with Kunlun-jun. Why, fuck me, this old broad is awesome.”<sup>245</sup>

Zhao Yunlan says nothing.

“Oh right,” Zhu Hong takes a card wallet out of her pocket, and finding a hotel discount gold card between her thick stack of bank cards and discount cards, tosses it onto Zhao Yunlan’s desk. “I heard you have a home you can’t go to. I’ll give you this 40% off. At least you won’t end up spending all your salary on cheap hotels. This is as much help as I can give you.”

Zhao Yunlan accepts the card without a word. He then rudely says to Zhu Hong, who’s been poking him where he hurts, “Get out.”

Zhu Hong gets out. Later, Chu Shuzhi brings in the documents Zhu Hong prepared, and then does an exceedingly unnecessary thing before making the delivery — like sitting across from Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan throws his mouse. “Are you all quite finished?”

Chu Shuzhi says, “I’m only going to ask one thing.”

Zhao Yunlan says, “I never loved you!”<sup>246</sup> Also, Xiao Guo really is an incarnation of the Zhenhun Lamp’s wick. And now that we’re done talking you can get out.”

Chu Shuzhi asks, “So, that’s why he has great merit as granted by the heavens, same as Nüwa?”

Zhao Yunlan plays minesweeper on the computer with a savage expression. “To be a consistent kind of person for a hundred lifetimes as if for a day, consistently doing the same kind of things in order to keep the Zhenhun Lamp burning — would that not grant more merit than being a human? If you can’t fathom it because you suffer from middleschool disease, keep it to yourself. Stop being a disgrace.”

Chu Shuzhi’s brows furrow. “How awful. So he represents the conscience you especially lack?”

Zhao Yunlan replies, face utterly blank, “I’m going to say it once more. Get. Out.”

Chu Shuzhi takes one look at him, waggles a brow, and carries out his attack of ridicule. “Tch. An insatiable old man who can’t go home and has to go to a hotel can have such a terrible temper.”

Zhao Yunlan lifts his inscrutable face to stare dangerously at Chu Shuzhi. Chu Shuzhi shrugs, and humming a tune, slips out of the room.

On his monitor, minesweeper explodes in his face. Zhao Yunlan looks away, moody. “Fuck.”

He concludes his work, half the day spent idly minesweeping. When it’s nearly time to clock out, his office door is once again pushed open. Daqing shows his pitch-black cat head. “Ai. Someone’s looking for you.”

Zhao Yunlan looks up with astonishment, his UV protection glasses slipping down his nose a little. “I didn’t get an appointment...”

Daqing ignores him, turns around in a circle so he can use his butt to push the office door open, saying to the person behind him, “Come on in Teacher Shen.”

Once Zhao Yunlan figures out who’s behind the door, his expression darkens at light speed and he lowers his eyes, goes cold to say flatly, “If you’re here to report a crime, please go to the local police station. We don’t directly accept cases.”

Shen Wei must have just returned from school, a dozen lesson plans still clutched in his hands, and he smiles, looking helpless. “Yunlan...”

“Who are you? Don’t call me like that. I don’t know you,” Zhao Yunlan interrupts. “Sorry ah, sir. I banged my head a couple of days ago and somehow lost my memory — my head’s all foggy. Lately, I’m not fit to receive guests. Please do close the door for me on your way out, thank you.”

Strictly speaking, this is the first day Zhao Yunlan came into work after the incident. Shen Wei was in a coma for more than a week, and Zhao Yunlan silently stayed by him for more than a week. But after Shen Wei wakes and he made sure there’s nothing wrong with him, Zhao Yunlan doesn’t say anything further, and looking like he’s done with their relationship, leaves Shen Wei and his own apartment behind to stay elsewhere.

Shen Wei looks like he’s about to say something, but the clock-out bell on the desk rings; with motions too fast for the eyes Zhao Yunlan shuts down his computer and puts his work things away. Picking up his overcoat and briefcase he goes for the door, saying, “Ai, sir, you need to get out of the way. We’re all clocking out.”

Shen Wei grabs his wrist. “...I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” Zhao Yunlan blinks, lowering his voice to say with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, “You’re sorry? What are you sorry about? Think about it, and say it again. Here’s a friendly reminder: I hate people who break promises the most.”

Shen Wei is immediately hushed, his words gone.

Black cat Daqing licks at his paws, unconcerned, watching the scene that has nothing to do with him unfold. “Aiya, SM Deep Love.”<sup>247</sup>

Zhao Yunlan tries tugging his hand back but it won’t budge an inch, and furrowing his brows, replies, “If you have something else to say, hurry up and say it. I have a date at the hotel after work.”

Shen Wei’s hand tightens for a moment, but in the end he’s no oily-mouthed smooth talker. He takes ages to mull his words over, and the only thing he repeats is still the same “I’m sorry.”

Zhao Yunlan sneers at him, on one hand trying to make him let go, and on the other elaborating with nonchalance. “No worries. That fine with you? Do you need us to ‘take a bow’ and ‘shake shake hands’ to finish things off?”<sup>248</sup>

“Aiya, off in a hurry to bed someone else, huh,” the black cat comments, dragging out all his vowels in an attempt to make it sound dirty. Shen Wei glances down at him, and hears him meowing out the next sentence unhurriedly, “He wouldn’t dare even if he’s lent a gallbladder.”

Zhao Yunlan can’t say anything.

This ungrateful animal!

Across the hall, Criminal Investigation is also quietly packing up to leave work. Lin Jing is the first out the door, and he stares blankly for



a second at the scene before him. “Oh, good day Teacher Shen. You’ve come to stop him from leaving? Great timing!”

Chu Shuzhi appears behind him, clapping. “Great timing! Good technique!”

Zhu Hong busies herself flipping the pages of a novel on her cell phone, doesn’t even look up as she announces a hotel name and room number. “I think a night raid is a great idea. You can resolve your mental conflict with physical compatibility.”

Within ten-odd days, it seems Zhu Hong’s worldview has entirely shattered, and through some means accidentally ascended to the plane of “love him and therefore would love to see him crushed by someone else.”

Guo Changcheng is the last to leave. He locks the door behind him and politely says, “Good day Teacher Shen.”

Even though he has no idea what’s going on, he unprecedentedly breaks form to add, “Zhao-chu, please don’t be angry anymore. Weren’t you worried sick when Teacher Shen got hurt a while ago? You watched over his bedside the whole time, didn’t even get any rest yourself.”

All the senior members turn to him, and in Guo Changcheng’s entirely confused gaze, collectively give him a thumbs up — young man, right in the bull’s eye, good job!

Guo Changcheng is at a complete loss, having no idea at all that he’s just inadvertently told on their leader, and is unknowingly about to face down an entire year of bullying by the boss.

Zhao Yunlan is again unable to say anything.

These ungrateful animals!

In the blink of an eye they all scatter like birds and beasts, leaving behind only Daqing who recklessly stays to watch, attempting to get some preview on the next installment. Unexpectedly, Lao Li, who is always late getting off work, approaches with a lunch box, filling the hallway with the smell of dried fish. Daqing cusses, “Shit,” under his breath, and walks around and around Shen Wei’s legs, saying, “Your honourable one, please take me in!”

Shen Wei takes Zhao Yunlan’s apartment keys out of his pocket and hangs them around the cat’s neck. Then Daqing makes like a rocket leaving a bow, stout and roundly leaping out of the window.

Of course, Lao Li sees this. He nods sadly at the two left in the hallway, bending to leave the lunchbox in front of the door to Criminal Investigation. He says to Zhao Yunlan, “You can heat it up tomorrow for Daqing to eat.”

Zhao Yunlan doesn’t know what face to wear in front of the person who bullied his cat when he wasn’t around, and impassively nods back at him. Lao Li sighs, “But it won’t be crunchy anymore.”

Looking a bit desolate, he leaves.

Finally, they are the only two left in a twilight flooded hallway.

Shen Wei waits for a while in the silence before saying gently, “Are you still not willing to forgive me?”

Zhao Yunlan turns away, suddenly gaining a deep interest in the weather outside.

Shen Wei lowers his head, and little by little, lets him go. “Kunlun, you...you can punish me however you want.”<sup>249</sup>

Really, Zhao Yunlan hasn’t thought about punishing Shen Wei — he can’t hit him, and he can’t yell at him, but his heart won’t calm so he can only get angry. He equivocally says with neither yin nor yang in

his tone, "What are you saying, sir? I really did come down with a case of am-ne-si-a without any warning. Honestly, I have no idea what's happened. Don't try to confuse me because I've become a fool — being a human means you have to be generous and kind, you know."

Shen Wei's lips are turning pale, and Zhao Yunlan steels himself so he would stop looking. He turns to leave, but he doesn't even get to take a step before he hears a sound that makes him whip his head around, and finds Shen Wei kneeling.

It makes him pause before saying, "What are you doing?" Bending down to tug at him. "What is wrong with you? Get up!"

Shen Wei doesn't make a sound.

Zhao Yunlan speaks again, "Get up!"

Shen Wei still doesn't make a sound.

Exasperated, Zhao Yunlan doesn't know what else to do but to join him, and sits down on the floor.

After a while, he reaches out to poke at Shen Wei, "Ai, sun's about to set. Night shift's going to come out. Aren't you worried about losing face, your honourable Zhanhun-shi?"

Shen Wei whispers, "Didn't you say you don't remember me?"

Zhao Yunlan utters after a pause, feeling in no mood at all for this. "Yes, right. Who are you, sir?"

Shen Wei's grasp tightens.

Zhao Yunlan is silent for a time, then says, "If Shennong wasn't scheming all along, didn't let the real Kunlun-jun out when you tried to rob me of my memories, what would have happened to me?"

Would I forget everything when I wake up like everyone else? To never know that you ever existed? Would everything that has to do with you also vanish, and I'm left to wonder who remodelled my kitchen — am I right?"

Shen Wei hesitates a beat before nodding.

Zhao Yunlan coldly asks, "Actually, I really want to ask: just how ruthless is your heart?"

Shen Wei tentatively reaches out, and on seeing that Zhao Yunlan doesn't avoid him, slowly gathers him into his arms. He looks as though he has a million justifications, but none of them would leave his mouth. He doesn't even want to mention his reasons, he just apologizes for the third time, this time next to Zhao Yunlan's ear. "I'm sorry. I was wrong."

It seems no matter how much pain he is in, he can bury all of it like a secret, cross it off with a single brush stroke; right and wrong doesn't matter — he would admit to his mistakes as a matter of course.

What little anger was barely hanging onto Zhao Yunlan's heart extinguishes all of a sudden, and so completely that not even ashes are left behind. Faintly, his heart aches.

He lets Shen Wei hold onto him and bringing them both up from the floor, heads outside, following a path of twilight.

Shen Wei follows, and he asks softly, full of hope, "Going home?"

Zhao Yunlan states, "Hotel."

Shen Wei's footsteps stop abruptly behind him, hope draining out of his gaze.

Zhao Yunlan sighs. Still sounding a bit mean, he tells Shen Wei, "I already paid for the room. So what if I stay another night?"

Shen Wei blinks, staring at him, not seeming to understand.

“Besides, I didn’t say you can’t come with.”

## Extra 2

*Translated by foxghost (all footnotes are translator’s notes by foxghost)*

A comparatively serious demon-raising incident affecting a certain city in the southern part of the country needed the attention of Chu Shuzhi. He takes Guo Changcheng with him. They spend nearly a whole month there before the incident can be considered perfectly resolved, and the two return to 4 Bright Road.

Guo Changcheng is still as unskilled as he ever was. There are times when everyone feels that Guo Changcheng and their office’s newest member, Xiao Mi, cannot be any more alike.

Oh right, forgot to mention: Xiao Mi is a one year and some old Samoyed dog with an outsized appetite and an undersized intelligence.

It started with a lost dog delivered to the neighbourhood police station, living there for over a month. Though the owner never came back to claim him, it did manage to eat everyone poor. After a few more twists and turns, Zhao Yunlan manages to gain possession of the dog and to keep it at 4 Bright Road in an attempt to divert Daqing’s gloominess on seeing Lao Li.

The whole day through Xiao Mi eats when it should eat, drinks when it should drink, doesn’t ever take anything to heart. Before Chu

Shuzhi left for the assignment, he spent more than a month with much effort teaching this dog the two tricks of 'sit' and 'shake,' only to discover it had discarded the only two skills it possessed on Java Island<sup>250</sup> by the time he gets back. Other than to stare blankly with two giant innocent eyes and run around humping legs, its brain seems entirely empty and devoid of dog tricks.

In the way that so many skills seem unteachable to the both of them, it does look very much like Guo Changcheng and Xiao Mi belonged to the same family eight hundred years ago.<sup>251</sup>

But none of it takes away from how he's in possession of a holy artefact.

The catastrophic rupturing of chaos decimated Difu, and Shen Wei near single-handedly sets up the new order. The sheep skin he wears covers him quite well and he rarely makes an appearance, nor does he meddle in the new administration's affairs, but the new Difu, given a new lease on life by the wolf that is Shen Wei, dares not treat him with less than the respect he's due. The Zhanhun-shi that all three realms yielded to now yields more power than ever, so naturally his habit of collecting the remnants of lone souls and wild ghosts passes without the merest notice, all to the advantage of Guo Changcheng's little stun baton.

If one takes some time and considers that Guo Chancheng tends to turn into a trembling bald chicken whenever he runs into danger, how he always manages to turn fear into sheer power feels rather miraculous.

When Chu Shuzhi returns to the office, he ignores all of his paperwork in favour of watching the stock market and studying the candlestick chart while wearing a grave expression, leaving Guo Changcheng to patiently post invoices and fill in expense reports. He goes to find Zhao Yunlan so he can sign the paperwork, but

unexpectedly finds the opposite office door locked — Zhao Yunlan isn't here.

Guo Changcheng scratches his head. He asks innocently, "Zhao-chu isn't here?"

Zhu Hong doesn't bother looking up from her computer. "Officially, our new office lease is finalized today and he's gone to do final inspection and put his signature on things. He thought he may as well move today too — dammit, why is everything so slow? I sincerely hope the net is faster where we're moving."

Poor Xiao Mi's being chased by a little cat all over the room, but Daqing brakes to a stop from his bullying when he hears this. The black cat raises his head to speak, "What about unofficially?"

With an odd tone carrying both longing and a distant ache, Zhu Hong says, "His man fucked him so hard he can't get out of bed obviously."

Not about to disappoint, Guo Changcheng is so shocked by these words he ends up sitting down crookedly, and the chair rolls away from beneath him, leaving him to crash solidly onto the floor.

Zhu Hong glances dismissively at Guo Changcheng, telegraphing what a fuss about nothing, and sucks her teeth at him. "Our leader is a faggot, what are you so surprised about — ai, is everyone's net slow? This is so infuriating."

Chu Shuzhi comments, "It's pretty slow."

The one taking up all the bandwidth playing an online game is Lin Jing, and he keeps quiet through all of this pretending to be invisible. He doesn't stay invisible for long though, and as quickly as he's discovered, Zhu Hong beats him up.

As punishment, they disconnect Lin Jing's computer from the network and he's left to waste his time away by playing an offline

game called Plants vs. Zombies.

... and that's why it's Chu Shuzhi's turn to beat him up now.<sup>252</sup>

Head in his arms, Lin Jing drapes himself over his desk, tearily saying, "These days are so hard to get through."

Chu Shuzhi orders, "I see you're so devoid of work you have dan teng<sup>253</sup>. Xiao Guo, don't bother writing that report. Give it to someone who has nothing to do."

Guo Ghangcheng looks over at Lin Jing, and finds him tearfully taking a selfie to capture his 'as rain on pear blossoms' look, and laughs, not unkindly. "Don't worry about it. I'll write it."

Lin Jing, pooled on his desk, steals a glimpse of Guo Changcheng, and after a while, does it again.

Guo Changcheng is sitting there typing quietly, slow and meticulous the way he does everything, not a hair out of place. Lin Jing, watching him, finally can't suppress his curiosity any longer, and with lightning speed he stands just to pluck a hair off Guo Changcheng's head over his desk.

Guo Changcheng cries out in pain, looks bewilderingly up at him.

Lin Jin gives off a mischievous laugh. "It's nothing. Just some research."

"It'll just give off the smell of burnt protein if you set it on fire," Chu Shuzhi scoffs, not bothering to look up. "Hair is just a part of the mortal shell. Every reincarnation gets a new shell. How could it have anything special to it? Your research is skin-deep."

Lin Jing asks after a pregnant pause, "How did you know what it'd smell like if you set it on fire? Did you already try to burn it?"



Chu Shuzhi ignores him.

“What I still don’t understand,” Lin Jing says, playing with that one strand of Guo Changcheng’s hair, the humour vanishing from his face . “How could such a perfectly normal looking young man be ... ai, Xiao Guo, do you think there is anything special about you? Something that’s different from other people?”

They’re not sure how, but everyone’s come to a tacit agreement to not mention anything regarding the Zhenhun Lamp in front of Guo Changcheng. Guo Changcheng stares back at Lin Jing blankly and doesn’t get what he’s saying at all. He shakes his head. “Oh, maybe I’m a bit dumber?”

Lin Jing says ,“But ...” and pauses, his voice stopping suddenly.

Kunlun-jun has confirmed that Guo Changcheng is the Zhenhun Lamp’s wick. He’s lived a hundred lifetimes and underwent a hundred calamities and none of it altered his first intentions. The merit<sup>254</sup> accumulated on his soul is a match to Nüwa who created humans, and yet heaven’s given him no blessings and no favours. He has no luck nor fortune; he toils in obscurity ignorant of what he is. Lin Jing’s words fade to silence as he realises he doesn’t want to tell Guo Changcheng about this at all, even if this young man, who lit the last Zhenhun Lamp, who can be said to have finally ended the war between chaos and order, is so extraordinary.

Without a third eye, yet he can always see the truth.

Great Merit, heaven-sent, and yet he remains a nobody.

“But what?” Guo Changcheng asks, puzzled.

“Nothing ... I was just wondering how come the sceptre handed down by Kunlun-jun is called ‘Zhenhun-Ling’,” Lin Jing mutters, and he doesn’t wait for Guo Changcheng to figure out what he’s said before he asks, “Oh yeah, what do you do after work?”

Guo Changcheng lists off, “Oh, I have to make a delivery to Nana Li’s house, and the Southern Tibet Educational Support Group is working on their summer plans so I’m going there afterwards. I work on things like posters and brochures for them in the evenings.”

Lin Jing’s fingers count unconsciously through his prayer beads. “Hinayama the Lesser Vehicle said that the only person who can help you cross the great river is yourself, but after, Mahayana the Greater Vehicle spoke of ferrying all living things across to reach the shores of enlightenment<sup>255</sup> — come to think of it, I’ve wondered this whole time: Xiao Guo, you’re so busy running around everyday. What do you do it all for?”

Guo Changcheng says, “I don’t ... don’t do it for anything. It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

“Then how do you decide for yourself what to do, and what not to do?” Zhu Hong cuts into the conversation.

Guo Changcheng swallows, stretching out his neck like a goose freshly plucked out of the water; he has no idea why everyone suddenly seems interested in him. Maybe he’s seen too many dramas: being the centre of attention always makes Guo Changcheng feel as though he’s acquired a terminal illness, giving him the misconception that he’s not long for the world.

Subconsciously he begins to stammer.

“I, I just don’t do bad things, and occasionally, if there’s something I can help with then I help out. I don’t know anything about anything.” Guo Changcheng’s voice gets smaller and smaller as he speaks, until it naturally becomes as high and quiet as a mosquito.

“I’m suddenly reminded of a saying,” Chu Shuzhi, who’s kept quiet all this time, cuts in. “I saw it on a mural of an old tomb. Impossible to say which era it’s from, now. It said, ‘Men’s hearts harbour

corruption, often suffer from worry, hold grudges from anger, commit countless crimes they ought not. Only the three words ‘do no harm’ is the greatest virtue under heaven, and of those who can benefit mankind and subdue souls, there is none other.”<sup>256</sup>

“Of those who can benefit mankind and subdue souls, there is none other...” These words seem to float halfway across Dragon City, from the elder Zhao ... no, from Shennong-bo’s mouth. “Recently, I have been harbouring doubts.”

Zhao Yunlan sits lazily reclining by the window, crossing an ankle over one knee, looking outside. Dragon City University’s head office is within view; he has no idea if it’s because exams are near, but Shen Wei is surrounded by students asking him questions as soon as he’s finished class. Zhao Yunlan follows him with eyes carrying a hint of a smile, and spares very little attention he has left to ask, “Hmm, like what?”

“The divine wood plaque Shansheng left behind — why is it called the Zhenhun-Ling?”<sup>257</sup>

Zhao Yunlan sweeps over a glance. “What do you think?”

Shennong-bo stops to think, then carefully choosing his words, says, “I have heard that there are only two kinds of people who are unafraid of death. One who is carrying out the true wish of his heart, blames on one, has no regrets. The other, one who knows exactly what is on the other side of death. In these five thousand years, the Zhenhun Lamp continued to burn. All of this happening now: the shattering of the Lesser Wheel of Reincarnation, the creation of the Greater Wheel of Reincarnation using the Ghost King’s soul as a medium and borrowing Great Merit from the Zhenhun Lamp to join them together — is it all just a gambit by the Old Gods?”

The corner of Zhao Yunlan’s mouth rises, revealing a dimple on his cheek. “If we’re so clever, then how come we all died off one by one?”

Shennong asked you to keep an eye on Zhanhun-shi. Did five thousand years of watching him turn you into a conspiracy theorist?"

Shennong-bo just looks more and more suspicious. "Then why did Shansheng leave behind the Zhenhun Lamp and the Zhenhun-Ling? Why did my founding teacher just happen to let out your memories and powers at that exact, crucial moment?"

"When Shen Wei decided to wipe my memories, he'd already fulfilled everything he agreed to in his contract," Zhao Yunlan pours himself a cup of tea, "The contract is concluded, and the influence Shennong had on both of us dissipated entirely, and that's why I was able to 'wake up.'"

Shennong-bo says, "Then you're saying ... it's a coincidence?"

"That's not it, either," Zhao Yunlan murmurs after a little thinking.

Shennong-bo is even more confused.

Zhao Yunlan looks at him, but not in the way a son looks up at his father. His gaze passes through their two mortal shells, falling onto the medicine pot itself.

At this moment, he seems to have become an elder.

"Wait some more," he says. "Maybe give it another thousand, another two thousand years, you'll get it. Some things must be learned through your own experience; it won't do you any good for someone else to just tell you. When you want to sacrifice your life for a just cause, you'll be able to grasp truths that no one else could understand. Whether it's about the Zhenhun Lamp or Shennong's contract, when we made those decisions at the time, we were only able to grasp a shadow of the future. It could move in a good direction, or maybe ..."

Shennong-bo asks, "And if it didn't move in a good direction?"

“The world will naturally gain new gods after we die. They’ll learn from our mistakes. It’s not in vain.” Zhao Yunlan hears Shen Wei’s familiar footsteps coming upstairs, and he gets up, takes the windbreaker he’s hung on the back of his chair and throws it over an arm. He turns his head to Shennong-bo, “Aren’t you one of the ‘new’ gods?”

Shen Wei arrives as Shennong-bo is still mulling over that, and with an indifferent air gives him a courteous, perfunctory nod. When his gaze lands on Zhao Yunlan, it softens in an instant. He asks, “Are you leaving now? Have you finished with your conversation?”

Zhao Yunlan makes a sound of agreement, and says to Shennong-bo, “Drive carefully on the way back, don’t let my dad notice anything. Take good care of his body.”

Shennong-bo stands, saying deferentially, “I must thank Shansheng for the guidance. In truth, I came today to beg my leave. It can be said that I have accomplished my task and it would be unseemly to hang onto a mortal’s body any longer.”

Zhao Yunlan seems taken aback, but only for a second. “When are you leaving?”

“Today,” Shennong-bo says, “I’ll return elder Zhao <sup>258</sup> home right away.”

“That’s good.” Zhao Yunlan thinks for a second, and without a care, waves his goodbyes. “Take care. Don’t hesitate to come to me if you need anything.”

The couple leaves for downstairs together. Shennong-bo stands silently by the window, and watches the two of them move unhurriedly toward a residential neighbourhood across from campus full of European style houses with gardens, walking at a leisurely speed like they’re taking an afternoon walk. He’s reminded of what

Zhao Yunlan said, that he's been waiting for Shen Wei so they can move house together.

Farther ahead, from the neighbourhood greenbelt to the immense balconies of the buildings, clusters of flowers of every colour blossom soundlessly where they pass. Only now does Shennong-bo realise that spring is already in the air.<sup>259</sup>

## Extra 3

*Translated by foxghost (all footnotes are translator's notes by foxghost)*

Later, the Special Investigation Department moves away from 4 Bright Road to 9 University Road, just one pedestrian crossing away from Dragon City University.

Lin Jing lingers at their old address just before the move, reluctant to leave, and goes around and around the empty office with his recently upgraded equipment — a long barrel SLR camera — and photographs every last detail; not even the cobwebs escape his scrutiny. When he's done, Lin Jing picks out the few he's satisfied with and sends them to a magazine publisher, hoping to make a name for himself in the "Former Haunts" series.

Thus leading to the editor-in-chief of the magazine suffering a great blow to his delicate psyche.

The editor-in-chief ends up in the hospital over the incident, and reporting what they perceived as a 'malignant, intentional manufacturing of supernatural photographs for the purpose of scaring people' to the police. As familial shame cannot be spread

abroad, Zhao-chu can only show his face and quietly settle things behind the scenes. When he comes back, he beats the crap out of that idiot fake monk in the path of his innocent gaze.

Eat, sleep, beat Lin Jing; the crew at 9 University Road finally fall back into their ordinary, everyday routine.

The accommodation at their new office is decadent to the extreme, with a sunny attic upstairs and a double cellar below. The second cellar houses their book collection, while the first cellar is a shrine-like space with a mahjong table surrounded by a circle of memorial tablets. During the day it provides a resting place for their ghost employees, and any individual suffering from insomnia can get up and play a round of mahjong.

... And so, during the day, one can often hear the sound of shuffling mahjong tiles from the mysteriously locked first cellar.

On the top floor, the attic is warm and bright with sunshine, painted with a thick layer of soundproofing paint; those who are tired can take a noon nap, and opening the windows affords one the view of the whole courtyard — unfortunately there is no beautiful scenery to be had.

Since members of the S.I.D. could not come to an agreement regarding a plan for the garden, there's no unified theme. After they divided up the space, the courtyard has become a weird mixture of styles containing a little bit of everything.

Zhao Yunlan claims the entire rear courtyard for himself. With an oddly cultivated aesthetic that has nothing at all to do with the arts that he's ignored his whole life through, he vetoes Zhu Hong's favoured Japanese roses, vetoes Chu Shuzhi's suggestion of vines, vetoes Lin Jing's request of a Bodhi tree ... ultimately planting an entire rear courtyard worth of vegetables.

There's mini cole, cherry tomatoes, pumpkin seedlings, pea sprouts, Chinese cedar sprouts ... a veritable neighbourhood of assorted vegetables growing side by side. In the middle of it all stands a coquettish eggplant<sup>260</sup> surrounded by all the other plants the way stars surround the moon.

Zhao Yunlan hints that come winter he'll even fill the entire rear courtyard with bok choy.

From then onwards, neither mortal nor ghost has played in the rear courtyard that has become a vegetable garden.

By the time Shen Wei finishes class, the sun has already begun inclining towards the west. It's still warm outside, and the short stroll from school even counting the time it takes to wait for the light to change is only five, six minutes at most.

The entire staff of the S.I.D. each holds a copy of Teacher Shen's class schedule. They wait eagerly for his arrival daily as one watches for the stars and the moon. There was once a time that the soldiers skipping out on work along with the leader was routine, because when the ceiling beams are crooked the pillars come along; since their leader Zhao Yunlan stopped messing around and started calmly spending all his days in the office like a hermit though, those days are long gone.

In this respect, everyone feels a little depressed, even in light of their new surroundings.

Yet when Teacher Shen arrives he can always swiftly take the leader away. And if the leader is gone, naturally it implies that everyone else can leave work early as well.

As he steps through the door, Shen Wei is greeted by countless "good day Teacher Shen" and "good work Teacher Shen" and many more besides along with such fervent looks from everyone that it's



borderline like the staff are held in enemy territory awaiting a liberating army. Shen Wei finds it hard to adapt to this at first, but as time goes by he's no longer fazed by all the attention.

Guo Changcheng is zoning out, Zhu Hong is doing some online shopping, Chu Shuzhi is watching the candlestick graph, Lin Jing is tinkering with a new model of wiretapping device: a fish scale-like thing the size of a girl's fingernail that turns invisible and records in secret once it sticks to anything.

Black cat Daqing nests on the staircase handrail, waving his tail at Shen Wei. "He's in the attic."

Shen Wei makes an approving hum, nods as he says "Thank you," but when he's just about to pass by, he lifts a brow slightly and glances at Daqing. "Be careful, don't fall off now."

... The handrail only looks half as big as Daqing's stomach. The way he's lying prone on top of it looks extremely weird.

Daqing stares blankly for a full second, then with a wail he turns into an angry furball. "I'm practicing—Yo—ga! What's wrong with practicing yoga? You got a problem with that?"

Keeping a smile on his face, Shen Wei reaches out to stroke his head, and goes upstairs.

Daqing furiously drapes himself back down on the handrail. Lin Jing asks, teasing, "Aiyoh, little princeling Daqing, which yoga pose are you practicing?"

Daqing says after a pause, "Cat pose."

Those who follow the Way never lie, so goes the doctrine. Lin Jing appropriately shows his evaluation with a peal of laughter.

... As a result he gained two new bloody scratches on his face. The wiretap in his hand goes flying towards destination unknown, turning invisible.

Lao Li, who's always appearing without a sound and vanishing without a trace, appears now to quietly supply cotton swabs and bandages as if he's the hapless master responsible for the aftermath of his cat's crimes. Yet the cat has no appreciation for his love at all, and doesn't bother with even a snort as he jumps off the railing into a cat stretch and leaves the scene.

There are times when such a thing as love is like a fragile pane of glass. It doesn't matter what kind of love it is: nothing can glue it back together after it shatters, even if the ones involved no longer cared, even if they have already chosen to forgive.

That's why a person should be faithful to oneself unto death. Whether choosing to be so selfish as to hurt countless without regrets, or to cherish another's affection from the beginning, even at the risk of looking like a fool.

Shen Wei pushes open the door to the top floor lightly. There's a sofa bed in the attic situated for a full day of sunlight, and Zhao Yunlan naps there with a blanket thrown across his waist, fingers still trapped between the pages of a book in his hands.

Shen Wei approaches quietly, stooping to kiss him lightly on the lips. Zhao Yunlan doesn't bother opening his eyes, he hums lazily with sleep and says, "You're done with class?"

Shen Wei answers with an agreeing noise, reaching out to prop up Zhao Yunlan by his back so he can sit down. "Wake up a little. It's not early anymore, and if you fall asleep again you won't be able to sleep later."

Zhao Yunlan takes advantage of the shift in position to lie down on Shen Wei's thighs. Yawning, he says blearily, "I didn't actually want

to sleep.”

With half-lidded eyes he waves the “Vegetable Planting Techniques” in his hands and grumbles, “I’m telling you, this book has to be cursed. I can’t ever get to the first chapter. Just the foreword is enough to knock someone out. I only made it to the 8th page now and I’m still stuck in the introduction.”

Shen Wei picks it up and flips through its pages. It’s a textbook from the agricultural university, and not a single centimetre of white space is wasted — even the pictures are black and white and so serious it has no entertainment value whatsoever. Shen Wei puts it aside and says without thinking, “Why do you bother reading it? If luck’s on their side, whichever seed you sow may even change into a refined essence and become Yao. There is no chance that any of them wouldn’t grow.”

Zhao Yunlan says, “No, only science and technology is the primary productive force<sup>261</sup>.”

Shen Wei says after a pause, “Why don’t you go back to study science and technology then.”

Zhao Yunlan rolls his eyes, and harbouring ulterior motives, says, “The primary productive force and I are jinxed. It reduces me to sleep in a single glance<sup>262</sup>.”

Shen Wei looks down, discovering that whatever sleepiness in Zhao Yunlan’s pitch black eyes has already evaporated, and they stare up at him with wordless amusement.

Zhao Yunlan reaches around so he’s holding Shen Wei by the waist. “If I can’t keep reading, then I’ll forget my meals, my mood will plunge, and if it goes on any longer I’ll fall into a depression!”

Shen Wei just looks at him without saying a word.

One lie after another comes out of Zhao Yunlan's mouth. "Listen, the suicide rate is really high in Northern Europe because the cold climate leads to depression. Kunlun mountain is covered in ice and snow that never melts — it doesn't even have heat, so my bones must carry the genes for depression."

Shen Wei is silent for a time before saying, "You must forgive my inability to see this."

Zhao Yunlan says, "You must not love me anymore! You ... man of easy virtue!"<sup>263</sup>

Shen Wei pushes at his temple as if to hold back a headache. "Stop acting so spoiled. What would you like?"

Zhao Yunlan laughs a mischievous laugh, revealing a row of neat white teeth.

"Fine. I'll read it to you when we get home," Shen Wei says, helplessly gentle, before uncomfortably averting his gaze. "But if you're going to listen, then be good and listen. If you get drowsy listening then sleep. You're not allowed to mess around."

His ears are taking on a flush, and he looks like a half-willing young bride that's just been picked on by an evil tyrant taking liberties, only half-willing because he's left without a choice.

Zhao Yunlan grabs hold of Shen Wei's collar indignantly and pulls him closer. "Can I trouble you not to be such a pure white lotus okay baby? From the fucking moment we met 'til now have I ever successfully taken a single dime of advantage of you ... fine I'll admit I've had more criminal attempts, but I haven't any criminal reality!"

Shen Wei hastens to placate him. "Okay okay okay, get up. Let's go home."

“I can’t.” Zhao Yunlan turns his face to the side, expressionless. “The muscles in my lower back are strained.”

Shen Wei says softly, bashful, “Then should I carry you?”

Zhao Yunlan takes a look at him in silence, and stands up in silence. He finds that his back doesn’t hurt at all anymore — but he does feel a pang in his stomach.

As soon as they step through the front door, the rest of the staff scatter like birds and beasts. Zhu Hong’s the first to slip out, with Lin Jing closely following. Chu Shuzhi pours himself a cup of cheap tea<sup>264</sup>, holding fast until the stock market closes before leisurely putting things away. As he’s about to go he raises his head to discover that Guo Changcheng still hasn’t left yet.

The room is empty save for them. Guo Changcheng sitting there staring into space without a word looks like a painted stage set, dazed to distraction. Chu Shuzhi asks casually, “Why haven’t you left yet?”

As if shaken from a dream, Guo Changcheng trembles violently and bumps the water-dwelling plant, spilling it all over his desk.

Chu Shuzhi subconsciously reaches for his own face, suspecting that maybe he’s been slack in the cultivation of his arts and his livor mortis is showing, somehow managing to scare this unfortunate child until he’s beside himself.

Guo Changcheng stammers, “I um I’m leaving,” and cleans up in a flurry of activity.

Chu Shuzhi can read body language well enough, so he asks, “Are you planning to go bomb a bunker? Why do you look like you’re going to war?”

If Guo Changcheng had a pair of dog ears, he guesses now they would be drooping.

Twenty minutes later, the two emerge from 9 University Road with Chu Shuzhi furrowing his brow and coming to a conclusion. “That is to say, your second uncle wants you to go to a xiangqin<sup>265</sup>.”

A spray of sparks explodes out of Guo Changcheng’s pocket.

Chu Shuzhi quickly sidesteps. “Watch it. What’s with the groundless worry? Is this girl you’re meeting a tigress?”

To avoid setting his pants on fire, Guo Changcheng hurriedly takes the stun baton out of his pocket, but that only attracts the attention of passersby instead; they don’t even manage to make it to the parking lot before the traffic cop at the crosswalk yells at them, “What’s going on? You can’t set off fireworks within city limits! Where’s your sense of civic responsibility?”

Chu Shuzhi silently covers his face and pretends to look up at the sky.

The lich king<sup>266</sup> is reclusive and detached; aside from the occasional garrulous words he exchanges with acquaintances, his entire person gives off an aura of ‘do not approach’, so he’s often lonely in the cold emptiness of his life. Outside of cultivating his essence, he has little to do in the long hours outside of work, leaving his well-hidden desire to gossip eternally unsatisfied.

He feels a sudden curiosity of how this human custom of xiangqin is conducted, and with a tone like he’s volunteering to join a war, he says, “Ok, stop spraying fireworks. You’ll get a fine. Why don’t we do this — I’ll sit by you pretending to be just another customer the whole time for your xiangqin, alright?”

Guo Changcheng gives him a tortured look, and from Chu Shuzhi's solemn face he can just glean a hint of the curiosity of a gossiping fishwife.

They arrive more than thirty minutes earlier than the appointed time, and it's only after Chu Shuzhi flips through an entire old magazine to pass the time before the girl arrives.

Chu Shuzhi looks on as Guo Changcheng freezes solidly into a human stick<sup>267</sup>, and thinks with some amazement that he hasn't seen a mortal with such great potential to become a jiangshi<sup>268</sup> for many years.

Chu Shuzhi moves his gaze downwards, finding Guo Changcheng's pant cuffs shaking uncontrollably, his entire body resembling a quail that found itself falling heavily on its ass on broken glass. He congratulates himself for confiscating Guo Changcheng's little stun baton beforehand, otherwise he's sure the young lady's perfectly ironed straight fringe would have been fried immediately into natural curls.

"Oh, come on. Grow up," Chu Zhushi thinks, feeling rather disappointed on his behalf.

Fortunately, the young lady has a good temperament, and doesn't go on Weibo on the spot to start a post titled, "Ran into someone outrageous at the xiangqin" as a souvenir. Instead she confidently attempts to keep the conversation going by cycling through a list of seemingly endless topics. From the start Guo Changcheng acts exactly like a criminal at a trial, whatever question thrown his way he must tremble thrice, all the while sending a continuous distress signal in Chu Shuzhi's direction. Unfortunately Chu Shuzhi feigns interest in the menu and is utterly unreceptive.

Ten minutes of trembling later, the lady finally can't help asking, "You ... are you a little nervous?"

Guo Changcheng, red all over, nods at her.

The lady smiles a little. “It’s not important. We’re only having a casual chat.”

Guo Changcheng, still red all over, nods again, and carefully gives her a single glance before looking extremely ill at ease, turning his gaze away.

Normally when coming across someone that can’t even speak clearly, the other side would flip desk and leave, but this young lady who’s come to this xiangqin seems to have an odd weakness. Facing someone like Guo Changcheng, a sense of protectiveness inexplicably grows in her heart.

“I think you’re just like Raj from the Big Bang Theory,<sup>269</sup>” she says happily. “Especially cute — my aunt says you’re a police officer. Really?”

Guo Changcheng makes a sound of agreement that comes off like a mosquito’s hum.

The lady says, “Really! I can’t tell at all. Then what do you do normally when you meet a bad person?”

Guo Changcheng spends a moment recalling, then truthfully illustrates just how he catches ‘bad people.’ He makes a clawing gesture, pretending to pick up his ‘secret weapon’ and says, “Just like this, and I tell, tell it, ‘you you you you you can’t come over here,’ and then I catch them.”

The lady stares at him blankly a second, and realising that it’s possibly a joke, she laughs, swaying back and forth in her mirth. “You’re just too cute!”

With naive eyes Guo Changcheng stares at her, utterly clueless.



Chu Shuzhi watches with his cheek in his hand and all the coolness of a bystander. When he thinks back on what they actually get up to during work, he does manage to find a hint of what one may call 'adorkable.' As he takes another look at the still happy girl and the utterly out-of-form Guo Changcheng, he glances at his watch. It's starting to feel rather dull sitting here.

But once these two start chatting they seem to go on and on; Chu Shuzhi reins in his impatience, takes out his phone and plays games for ages until his vision's starting to blur and he can't take anymore. He waves at the waiter, "Ready to order."

The waiter diligently comes over only to hear Chu Shuzhi say in a quiet and eerie voice, "One order of Kung Pao chicken, make sure the meat is only three parts done and still bloody."

The waiter is silent.

Guo Changcheng overhears this from across the room and immediately turns around to glance at Chu Shuzhi, recognizes the gloomy corpse-like scowl on the lich king and finally realises that he's gotten carried away.

But while he racks his brains trying to wrap up the conversation, the other side suddenly goes from easy to stern and says to him, "Oh, right, actually I still want to say that ..."

She pauses then, as if what she wants to say may be too embarrassing to mention.

Guo Changcheng asks, "What is it?"

The lady stares down at her lap and seems to think for a moment before saying, "This is our first meeting, so it's probably not appropriate for me to be saying this, but I really do like you quite a bit ..."

Guo changcheng sits as straight and stiff as a red Sorghum tree — even his eyes seem to turn vertical.

She continues to say, “So there is something I want to say before anything else. I didn’t really want to come here today at first because my aunt said you were a criminal police officer. I don’t think living with a cop is especially stable, really. Everyday I’d have to be on edge all the time thinking about how you are, and as time goes on,” she trails off then, sighing. “Is this line of work something you must do?”

Guo Changcheng stares blankly for a second, and before he’s able to answer, a hand grabs onto his shoulder without any warning, hauling him right up from his seat.

Guo Changcheng says, “Chu-ge?”

It’s too sudden for the lady at her xiangqin to react, and her gaze at Chu Shuzhi shows no reaction.

Chu Shuzhi gives her a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, before his attention shifts down towards Guo Changcheng, and he says with a tone that’s meant to cause confusion, “A xiangqin behind my back? Why, you certainly have such gall!”

Guo Changcheng is shocked to silence.

What, what is this situation?

The lady’s eyes widen, captivated, completely in awe of the lich king’s aura and this utterly contrived plot. Chu Shuzhi reaches into Guo Changcheng’s pocket, digs out a few Renminbi<sup>270</sup> bills and leaves them beneath a cup. Without another word of explanation, he stuffs Guo Changcheng beneath one arm and carries him out.

Guo Changcheng BSOD on scene and remains unresponsive until Chu Shuzhi stuffs him into the car. Chu Shuzhi stretches out his legs, and like an arrogant master of old, commands, “Start the car. Drop me off first.”

Guo Changcheng telegraphs ten thousand emotions tied up in knots in a single glance.

Chu Shuzhi says, “What are you glaring for, I’m doing this for her sake. To think she would dream up an idea like that, go digging at Kunlun-jun’s foundations<sup>271</sup>. Really...”

His speech halts, and a phrase comes to him unbidden like good fortune. He blurts out, “Stupid humans.”

...Stupid human Guo Changcheng doesn’t say anything, and with his face still bright red, he silently starts the car.

On his satchel, a little round disc that resembles a scale invisibly transmits.

The next day, a rumour seems to spring up from everywhere at once: Chu-ge and Xiao-Guo are going steady<sup>272</sup>, 9 University Rd is a nest for gays.

And what’s become of the person unfortunate enough to hear something he should not have, Lin Jing who spread the rumours?

Oh, may the lord Buddha preserve us, he’s gained so many bumps on his head it’s wrapped in enough bandages to resemble a turban<sup>273</sup>.

## Shen San Extra

*The Shen San extra is not part of this edition.*

## Extra 5

*Or, the chapter that turns the ending of the Guardian drama into a happy ending.*

*Translated by foxghost (all footnotes are translator's notes by foxghost)*

(1)

“... and then click on this. Now all you have to do is make up a payment PIN.” Zhao Yunlan hands the cellphone to Shen Wei, but after a moment of thinking he doesn’t wait for Shen Wei to take it and does it for him. “Forget it. I did it for you — it’s not like you have a new one anyway.”

Teacher Shen is stubbornly kind, has no concept of security, and all his PIN codes are just their street number.

Zhao Yunlan says, “Good thing you don’t have much money.”

Theoretically, comrade Shen Wei knows how to live just fine, and if he’s equally competent in handling his personal affairs — food, clothes, a place to live — as he is in administering the three realms<sup>274</sup>, then he must be doing so adequately with plenty of energy to spare.

Realistically, Shen Wei doesn't know how to take care of himself at all — in chaotic times he would find some place out of the way and seclude himself, and when the world's at peace he would make do with a rented room. He has wandered among mortals for many years, clean and free without making or worrying about money. Never mind buying property and settling down; until now, aside from a university-issued salary card he doesn't own anything.

As for what's between the earth and sky, the world's mountains and valleys, the country's administering its own tourism department and it's not like they put aside a percentage for him.

"Come, let me teach you how to send a red pocket." Zhao Yunlan hooks an arm over Shen Wei's shoulder, ruining his dignified pose, and using teaching as an excuse takes his phone and gives himself a red pocket, accepting it happily. "This century's very last old antique has formally entered the age of mobile payments, an occasion to be celebrated ... tch, what now."

His phone's ringing before he's done talking. Zhao Yunlan gives it a mere glance before deciding he doesn't want to pick it up, turning it over. Unexpectedly, the other side doesn't give up and calls three times in a row, and as if they know he's playing deaf, makes the next call on his office phone. Zhao Yunlan stretches a leg over the small sofa and pushes Daqing with a foot, midway through the cat's focused personal grooming. "Hey, fatso, pick up the phone."

Because Shen Wei is here, Daqing bristles but doesn't say anything, angrily whipping his tail as he jumps onto the desk. He pretends the phone receiver is Zhao Yunlan's face and smacks it with a paw. "Wei? Special ... Oh?" Daqing laughs, "Your leadership's looking for our Chief Zhao? Oh, he says he's not here."

Zhao Yunlan remains silent.

He turns his phone over and discovers that the last three calls weren't made by the same person — the last two were from his dad, so he's forced to crawl towards his desk with a new headache. "These ghosts and goblins. Don't they have anything better to do? They're all bothering the old man by the back door."

The Special Investigative Division, or the "Zhenhun Ling," used to be also a "Daycare" and "Labour Reformation centre for convicted criminals."

Outside of the mortal Xiao Guo, or Wang Zheng and Sangzan, comrades who've been taken in by Zhenhun Lingzhu, the members of their staff can be roughly sorted into two categories: ones like Zhu Hong and Lin Jing, sent by their leaders or family to train and to gain experience in The Way, or the other kind like Chu Shuzhi, a convicted felon working off his time. To begin with, because the Zhenhun Ling was established to coordinate the three realms and to keep peace in the mortal realm, it's really a thankless job: the everyday chore of wiping the asses of so-called evil perpetrators notwithstanding, they need to adhere to all the minutiae of society's laws. There's no real enlightenment to be had following their mortal of a boss around, so not many experts are willing to join them.

But now, things are different since the Great Seal shattered in a big way, the four holy artefacts returning to their places, the Great Wheel established, the Ghost King gaining godhood, Kunlun reclaiming his altar. Even though these facts are not well known, to those who are connected in the three realms, they are not really secrets, either. So the thankless, bitterly low paying work at the S.I.D. has become sweet dim sum overnight and everyone wants to join in order to rub shoulders with gods. Zhao Yunlan just hates to be bothered, and he refuses them all with the excuse of, "Can't fit so many names on the Zhenhun Ling."

However, even though the Zhenhun Ling can't bear so many names, the Special Investigative Division can — The S.I.D. is an

administrative agency.

And so in order to gain some connection to the Zhenhun token, some smart people have gone around making noise, forcing the original S.I.D. into restructuring. Dragon City's S.I.D. has morphed into "Special Investigative Bureau" and every region gets their own agency; it's become quite an organisation.

In this way, Department Head Zhao — Zhao-chu — who spends most of his time lying about in the attic of 9 University Road has somehow lied his way into becoming Bureau Chief Zhao — Zhao-ju.

This is the first year the S.I.B. started officially recruiting after their restructuring. The Zhao Yunlan who's quite happy passing the years quietly planting vegetables in the S.I.B. yard has been dragged out of his attic to manage the recruitment. Even though none of these newbies are to be entered into the Zhenhun Ling, they're still to join a 'branch office', and Zhao Yunlan doesn't want to invite a bunch of shoddy staff members of the quality of unformed melons just to make up the numbers — it's not like he's short on idiots — and now that the bureau's manpower's limited, it's impractical to have a big recruitment fair. This is why they've only sent out a small number of registration forms to each tribe and sect, to let their leaders choose their own candidates.

In order to get a few more registration forms, the experts from everywhere are pulling all the stops — making like the eight gods crossing the seas, working miracles.

"Wei?" Zhao Yunlan lazily picks up the phone, sighs, "Isn't an old man like you retired by now? Why are you wasting your time on this instead of organising with some old ladies and going square dancing? Nobody asked you to go around networking — Ugh..."

Daqing perks up his ears, taking in the robust long form essay from the other side in all rounded news-syllables. Zhao Yunlan tries to interrupt, coming up with excuses, "I'm not, I didn't," without avail,

and finally he gives up and leans on the edge of the table, nothing to do but to go from studying the ceiling to staring at Teacher Shen's god-level dust-free clean cuffs, finding himself seriously missing Shennong-bo — at least mister broken bowl didn't have all this desire to monologue.

Lately, the retired old director's been the object of too many heartfelt visits by strangers, and once he figures out what's happening, explodes in a fit of anger. It's already 2018 and he's never imagined that there are still people who would go to such lengths — to knock at such an out of the way backdoor — to get some rotten registration forms. How is this organisation run?

So he decides to call his son to give him a thorough lecture.

Zhao Yunlan answers as if reading a Buddhist prayer, "Yes, I know ... you said it ... no, I'm not using this opportunity to take bribes. The resources really are limited, we have too many applicants, we really can't meet them all ... I have not corroded away, it's not as if we're getting acid rain in Dragon City ... no, I don't need to have a smart mouth everyday. I'm facing the wall in serious reflection of my wrongs everyday, really, nipping all the bad in the bud ... if you don't believe me, ask Shen Wei!"

There are three knocks on the office door, and Lin Jing sticks his head in holding a calendar, but not before facing Shen Wei and greeting him with a fist in hand. "Thank you Teacher Shen — leader, tomorrow's Duanwu, the Dragon Boat Festival. I'm asking on behalf of everyone in the department: are you sending out holiday gifts?"

Zhao Yunlan, craning his neck to keep a phone receiver held between his chin and his shoulder, happens to have no energy for this, points at the door. "I'm sending a notice on how to pass the holiday with integrity. Get out!"

Representative Lin takes the blow and runs away in disgrace.



But Zhu Hong is already knocking just as he leaves. “Thank you Teacher Shen — Zhao-ju, my Sishu asked me to arrange a dinner. A few leaders from the yao tribes want to pay their respects,” she sighs, “I’m only passing on the request. They’re pretty annoying so if you don’t feel like going, don’t go. You don’t have to worry about giving me face.”

Zhu Hong is one of their own, and truly he doesn’t need to worry about such superficial bullshit as giving face when it comes to her, but the yao tribes are Kunlun-jun’s spiritual descendents, and in the ‘face’ of the yao tribe elders he’s left with no choice but to respect them. Zhao Yunlan can only wave at Zhu Hong helplessly.

The moment Zhu Hong turns around, she nearly runs right into Chu Shuzhi, who’s in such a hurry he only has time to nod at her. “Wait — Lao Zhao, something’s happened. Someone’s ... pulled a trick on the application forms.”

Shen Wei, who has been firmly focused on playing with his phone, hears this and raises his head. “What is it?”

In the everyday work of the S.I.B., Shen Wei tends not to participate in conversations unless someone asks him a question; this time, when he cuts in on his own, it is because the “watermark” on the application form is something he helped create. The Zhanhun-shi guarded the Great Seal and did not mispend these five thousand years; every leader of every tribe, from their celebrated beginnings to their bitter ends lived beneath his watchful eye. His entire person is a living “Lost Magics library” ... but since no one dares to come buy the rights from him, this “library” remains poor.

Chu Shuzhi says, “The application deadline’s still ten days away, but the applications we’ve received have already exceeded the numbers we sent out — oh, right, thank you Teacher Shen.”

Shen Wei creases his brows.

“Gather them all and let me take a look.” Zhao Yunlan puts down the phone and walks over. “Ai, speaking of which, what kind of code word is ‘Thank you Teacher Shen’? Why is everyone coming in saying that?”

Shen Wei says, “Uh...”

Chu Shuzhi says, “It’s for the red pockets Teacher Shen’s been gifting — Duanwu holiday bonus, right?”

Zhao Yunlan takes the phone out of Shen Wei’s hands to have a look. Within the time he took his call, Student Shen Wei has firmly grasped the concept of mobile payments. He even seriously worked in some after class practice — he went through his contact list and sent out a red pocket to every person in the bureau.

It’s not even a group red pocket, a free for all battle, first come first served. Teacher Zhao hasn’t managed to teach that lesson. He’s sent them out one by one.

He’s gone through half the contact list and still has the other half left, but there’s no money left in his account.

Their Teacher Shen treats money like game money — instant redeeming, the kind that doesn’t require exchange to virtual dollars.

Zhao Yunlan is silent.

Shen Wei silently questions.

“No...thing,” Zhao Yunlan drags the word out to two miles<sup>275</sup>, and from outside the two miles sends back a painful smile, “If you don’t have money I’ll send you some. Don’t leave the other half, keep sending them until you’re done. Ah,” he laughs, “You’re a fast learner.”

And in this way at this year's Duanwu, everyone still received their holiday bonus, sponsored by a certain Mr. Zhao. They were all extremely thankful.

(2)

All of the problematic registration forms have been piled into the basement. Though the light isn't on, it isn't dark, either; the faint silvery glow of the forms gathered together rivals an entire row of fluorescent tubes.

Wang Zheng and Sangzan work into daylight overtime. When Zhao Yunlan and his group come down the stairs, they've just finished grouping the forms by tribe and area.

The registration forms were elegantly designed, sent out in white envelopes with a little stamp, and all of them were made by Shen Wei. The form belongs to whomever can open the seal, and if someone else takes it they won't be able to record anything in it. It's the equivalent of a written exam — as a standard written exam would be impractical. For one, each person has their own speciality, for two, lots of experts hiding in the forests and the mountains to train can't read simplified Chinese.

Sangzan says, "Zhao-ju, Speaking Of Which, we have sent out 729 registration forms, and At This Very Moment we have received just over 1560."<sup>276</sup>

Zhao Yunlan says, "The difference is that much?"

Sangzan sighs, "Yes, What A Splendid Sight."

Zhao Yunlan doesn't say anything.

Brother Sangzan has been exceedingly ambitious in his years working for the S.I.D., studious in his studies. By now his spoken Mandarin is already clear and concise and he's discarded the terrible

nickname of “jieba,” so having raised standards for himself he’s teaching himself idioms, often tries to quote old texts wholesale. Thus began another round of trying his colleagues’ patience.

Zhao Yunlan is nearly used to this already, and with familiar ease disregards all the four-character words out of Sangzan’s mouth, waving dismissively to say, “You’ve worked hard.”

“Where Be Such Reasoning? It wasn’t hard at all,” Sangzan answers with a smile. “I Own Nothing But What I Need, and what I am able to contribute is merely A Hair From the Backs of Nine Bulls.”

Zhao Yunlan feels as though his life is being shortened, but Wang Zheng doesn’t seem to care as she stands to the side with an indulgent expression, only knows to look at him and smile like an idiot.

“Whatever, as long as you’re happy.” Zhao Yunlan says helplessly, “Hurry up and clock out, you two.”

Shen Wei’s ‘watermark’ isn’t something that just anyone can make bootleg copies of — not to mention to imitate it so expertly. During the time Zhao Yunlan and Sangzan had their conversation, he already managed to flip through all of the forms.

Chu Shuzhi says, “Teacher Shen, what do you think? Honestly, I can’t tell the difference.”

Shen Wei doesn’t make a sound; after contemplating a moment he makes a waving gesture and the glowing registration forms scatter like butterflies, moving away from the order Wang Zheng and Sangzan’s sorted them in. In a confusion of light and shadow the forms fall into two piles, one obviously thicker than the other.

Zhao Yunlan pulls on his pants’ cuffs and half crouches, checking a few out of each stack. He points at the thicker pile and asks, “All of these are identical?”

Shen Wei nods.

Listening in, Chu Shuzhi is confused. “And if they’re not? If they’re identical doesn’t that mean you can’t tell if it’s fake?”

“No,” Shen Wei says. “He means the seal on top of each envelope.”

Even though every seal on each envelope looks exactly the same, the methods to open them are different. This way, they can sort among the talents and the abilities of each, and it prevents the registrants from comparing their answers with each other.

When they sent out the registration forms, the different types of seals were sent out according to the tribes. For example, the snake tribes favour water, and opening the seal requires burning it with the Samadhi true flame, forcing the registrant to do something they wouldn’t want to do.

Of course, all the seals of the returning envelopes have already been broken, but the scent left behind is enough for its creator to see the problem — every seal in the thicker stack of forms is identical, obviously made by taking one and making duplicates.

Shen Wei says, “When we sent out the forms, I left a trace on each and every one. We can figure out which sect or tribe we’ve sent this one to.”

Chu Shuzhi stares, wide-eyed and shocked. “No way ... wait a second! Seven hundred odd forms, every single one is different? And you’ve left an identifying trace?”

“Mmhmm.” Shen Wei adjusts his glasses. “What about it?”

Chu Shuzhi is silent.

No wonder the bureau has never mentioned requisitioning labour costs for their consultant; if they get charged the market rate, it seems they would only be able to afford him by selling off Kunlun-jun.

With a clue, the rest is easy. After a simple check of their records, they find out that the problematic form went to a yao tribe — the water tribes of the South China Sea.

Zhao Yunlan stands. “Tell Zhu Hong to call her Sishu.”

In general, the yao tribes are separated into birds, beasts, water-dwelling, and the ascended, which is to say: ones that fly in the sky, ones that run on the earth, ones that swim in the water, then there are the stones, grass, and trees that have gained spirits. Those are then sorted into specific types, each with a place they call home.

Because the S.I.B.’s Zhu Hong is a part of the snake tribe and their leader Sishu is quite capable, treats his work and private matters as separate entities, the snake tribes can be said to have someone on the inside; but he knows to not exploit their position, and he’s become especially respected. In a few short years he’s already become the leader of the yao tribes, and whenever something goes wrong with the yao tribes, they speak to the She Sishu.

Not even five minutes after the She Sishu takes his niece’s phone call, he’s braved the blazing sun to arrive at 9 University Road. He’s briefed, and apologising formally to Kunlun-jun, knows he hasn’t face to ask for more registration forms. Turning, the old man personally rolls up his sleeves — heading off to the South China Sea to catch the bastard.

(3)

“Actually it is rather strange, if you think about it,” Shen Wei says as he slices up ham in the kitchen after they’ve come home. “There are mountains beyond mountains, talents I cannot imagine, so I can’t

absolutely guarantee something I make can't be duplicated. But that envelope is quite simple, and a real expert would be able to tell every seal is different. Why would they do something so stupid as to make hundreds of copies?"

Zhao Yunlan leans uselessly on the kitchen counter; he never helps, only ever gets in the way. He picks pieces of ham off the cutting board to snack on as Shen Wei slices. "What about a holy artefact? The pollution in these times hasn't helped the quality of the yao tribes any, but each tribe has their own history — maybe some holy item passed down from their ancestors."

Shen Wei finishes slicing the ham, and after a moment of silent contemplation turns to get a plate. "But I can't think about what it could be, right now ..."

Something so amazing it can duplicate the seal of a natural ghost king, and to use it to do something as silly as this — what holy artefact could it be?

Creator God Pangu brand Photocopier?

By the time he turns around with a plate for the sliced ham, Shen Wei discovers that someone's taken all the ham off the cutting board.

Shen Wei doesn't say anything.

Zhao Yunlan follows his gaze like he's slow on the uptake, and chewing with lightning speed swallows the 'evidence.' He stretches like a cat, as if the case of the missing ham has nothing to do with him at all.

Shen Wei asks, "... It's not too salty?"

He hears a sound like a click in his chest before Zhao Yunlan escapes the kitchen fearing the repercussion of his crimes, and both of them turn to look toward the southern skies.

Shen Wei asks, “What was that?”

“I don’t know, but ...” Zhao Yunlan squints. “It feels like the three sovereigns. Wei, Zhu Hong?”

“Lao Zhao, something’s happened to my Sishu!”

“Calm down, tell me slowly.”

“Didn’t he leave for the South China Sea? The tribe just sent news, the leader’s life lamp has suddenly gone out! My Sishu he ...”

“Don’t panic,” Zhao Yunlan says. “When a yao as great as he falls there would be visions — it wouldn’t be without a trace like this. Maybe he’s had a bit of an accident and his connection with his life lamp’s been severed. Let’s do this — have the snake tribe bring your Sishu’s life lamp, and I’ll go look for him with Shen Wei.”

They don’t have time to eat dinner properly so Shen Wei hurriedly stuffs their half prepared ingredients into the fridge. It looks like they’ll just have to order in when they come back later.

Another elder from the snake tribe sends over She Sishu’s life lamp. Zhao Yunlan and Shen Wei shorten the distance into a mere inch, and within the blink of an eye they arrive at the South China Sea.

Ever since the tourist industry began developing the South China Sea, the water tribe’s shrimp soldiers and crab commanders, useless to begin with, have somehow gotten worse. The little yao, seduced by the twin promises of sunny beaches and palm trees, spend their days wearing tropical swim trunks to pass their days among the humans. But the humans finish their vacations and go back to work and school, do what they’re supposed to do, while these dumbass little yao simply follow the next set of tourists and continue to play around. Their cultivation has flat-lined, and even



their study towards enlightenment has been delayed as they sun their shrimp shells and fish scales to a golden malt.

It stands to reason that when the snake tribe's leader makes a personal visit, this gang of under-trained garbage must greet him with a banner. Which sea urchin<sup>277</sup> gave them the courage to rebel?

Could it be their daily chore of sitting on the shore drinking fresh water has done something to their osmotic pressure, and their gall's gone swollen?

Anyway, Zhao Yunlan can't figure it out.

When they arrive at the South China Sea, it is to find the water tribes there in disarray; when they heard that Kunlun-jun and the Ghost King Dianxia<sup>278</sup> have come for them, the ones in charge of the tribes started pissing themselves. They're all kneeling on the sand, in their shorts and bare arms, faces towards the sand and backs to the sky; each person's back has been tattooed a single word, and strung together it reads, "This generation has committed sins worthy of ten thousand deaths, to the gods above we offer an apology."

It's such an amazing sight even the hermit crabs dare not show their faces.

"Get up. What are you all doing? We're here to talk. Stop being so embarrassing!" Zhao Yunlan sits at the edge of a cloud, and so struck by the sight he can feel a constant pulse at his temple — they can't even get down, there isn't any space on the beach. "I don't get it. It's been a hundred years since we buried such an archaic cultural practice — how is it that it's still intact among you yao tribes? Think before you act!"

The South China Sea is rich in resources, the seafood ... no, the types of yao belonging to the water tribes varied, and this branch of the water tribe tend to live all mixed together, with the tribe leaders

forming an alliance. The alliance's director is a 3000 year old big turtle, with the vice director being a 2500 year old sea cucumber.

The two directors are a golden partnership without conflict, and Zhao Yunlan listens to the weepy sounding report as they relate the cause of the problem but only manages to get through half of it before he feels his immortal soul go eight turns around the thirty-six mountains and valleys — his gaze going unfocused — and for the first time feels as though their Guo Changcheng is a smart and cunning boy.

It must be difficult, but Shen Wei listens to the end. “That is to say, your honourable tribe leader in charge of watching over the forbidden sanctuary did not receive a registration form, and in indignation he stole one and used the sanctuary to make a large number of copies?”

The sea turtle director says, sighing, “Yes, that person's original form was a barracuda, and they sold the fake registration forms making massive profits. He used the proceeds to buy areca nuts in bulk and has already gone on the run.”

“...It doesn't matter what he bought in bulk, let's leave that aside for now.” Shen Wei says, “Is it convenient for us to know what your honourable tribe is holding in the sanctuary? How were the registration forms duplicated?”

The sea cucumber answers with a bitter expression. “Your honour, aside from generations of barracuda charged with watching the sanctuary, none of us yao dare approach the area. According to the ancestors, an old holy artefact was sealed away there. Right — the leader of the snake tribes has come by, said he didn't understand our explanation at all and insisted on investigating the sanctuary. We didn't dare keep him, but not long after he went inside, the South China Sea had a sudden and huge quake, and he never came back. We still don't know what happened!”

Shen Wei turns his head so he can meet Zhao Yunlan's gaze, and Zhao Yunlan wakes from his nap, straightening his back. "Ai, then quit blabbering and lead the way."

By this time, the night has darkened. It is not yet Duanwu and the moon is hidden, the sea heavy and thick-seeming, but it looks like something restless and gigantic has awoken in the deep, causing unending waves that seem to resonate with the beating of Zhao Yunlan's heart. They're still more than two hundred miles from the sanctuary, but the two directors from the water tribes are already so terrified their faces have turned white, and cannot be convinced to go another step.

The vice-director says, "In the past we dared to patrol the sanctuary during the holidays, but from the day that stinking fish moved what it ought not, the sanctuary has become more horrifying day by day. At first, it was only the ten miles outside it, and now over a hundred miles, we can't — can't breathe ..."

As he says this, the vice director's eyes roll and turn white and they sink into the water as if they're lacking in both blood and air. The blade in Shen Wei's hand flashes like a dark shadow, and the Zhanhun blade appears, then in the blink of an eye stretches to dozens of feet long. With the scabbard still on, he promptly fishes up the sea cucumber from the deep.

Director sea turtle has no time to bother with politeness just now, and with a quick fist-in-hand bow changes into their natural form, picks up their partner, and swims away, quick as a torpedo.

Two dark shadows quickly skim over the undercurrent towards the South China Sea forbidden sanctuary.

The nearer they get to the sanctuary, the quieter the water becomes, and as they near the fifty mile mark, the surface becomes unnaturally still, as if an invisible hand is flattening it by force until there isn't even a ripple, until the water seems stagnant.

Very quickly, Zhao Yunlan and Shen Wei arrive at the heart of the sanctuary. There's a strange whirlpool here, its diameter no wider than two metres, spinning rapidly, and like a needle it pierces all the way down to the sea floor. There's a saying that even the sharpest blade cannot part water, but the water within and the water without looks like it's been parted with something — The inside spins at breakneck speed; the outside doesn't move a hair.

There's a hint of darkness woven into the air above the whirlpool, calling Shen Wei's Zhanhun blade — they're as related as waters that flow from the same stream.

"If it's a holy artefact left behind by some god during the time of chaos, it could very well react negatively with me," Shen Wei says, "If they'd tried to copy anything else it may have been fine, but that registration form carried a trace of me. It must have provoked what's sealed here — loosened the seal... And when She Sishu rushed in here he must have added flame to the fuel. I think the seal is already mostly broken — do you have any inkling of what's in here?"

Zhao Yunlan creases his eyebrows and thinks for a while before shaking his head. "I haven't seen it, but ..."

Something inside the briefcase in his hand suddenly flashes; it's She Sishu's life lamp, brightening. A life lamp is actually a candle protected by a dragon pearl; it's like a crystal lamp, shuddering as if it's about to stop breathing. Its weak light falls onto the surface of the sea and quickly gathers into a line, pointing towards the whirlpool.

Soon after, the dragon pearl outside the life lamp cracks without warning, and quickly disintegrates. Its feeble flame jumps once, and Zhao Yunlan instinctively tries to protect it with his hand, but the whirlpool on the water suddenly explodes in all directions, and the stars above scatter like dust in a storm. Nearly at once, Shen Wei pulls Zhao Yunlan close behind him with a sweeping arm and wields his blade like a shield in front of them.

But soon Shen Wei can feel that something is wrong — his hand did not touch Zhao Yunlan.

Shen Wei turns to look in surprise, and finds that though they are barely apart, there is a transparent membrane between them. Zhao Yunlan is saying something, but his voice can't reach him, so Shen Wei can only read his lips. He's saying, "These bubbles are ..."

Bubbles?

Shen Wei looks all around him. She Sishu's life lamp reflects and refracts, light and shadow overlapping. It reveals the countless membranes surrounding them, tight like densely packed soap bubbles. A faint mirage-like shadow can be seen on each 'bubble', and for a shocking moment they can see a million Zhao Yunlans, a million Shen Weis. As the two people in their individual bubbles drift apart, Shen Wei's eyes redden, and he unsheathes the Zhanhun blade, immediately cutting at whatever's between them.

With a sudden boom, the Zhanhun blade that can cut through anything feels as though it's been stuck in thick mud, and countless strange 'bubbles' are shattered by that single stroke. But many more 'bubbles' are rising from the sea floor as waves high as mountains crowd the surface of the sea. With a sharp and loud sound like an axe wielded by Pangu parting chaos to form the sky and sea, the mountains shake and the ocean boils, and Shen Wei's view darkens —

(4)

When Zhao Yunlan wakes with a start, he's still holding onto the short candle from a life lamp with a pea-sized flame. He tries to move and is momentarily stunned, a shocked expression flashing across his face.

Slowly, Zhao Yunlan lowers his eyes, his gaze falling onto his right foot ... he's sprained an ankle.

Kunlun-jun's incarnation is impervious to blades and guns, and neither the cold nor the heat bothers him. Since his god soul awakened six years ago, Zhao Yunlan has forgotten what a mosquito bite looks like. He never imagined he'd end up spraining his ankle at the South China Sea!

On the one hand he's gritting his teeth over the pain, on the other he finds it rather interesting. He runs a hand over it, determines that it's not serious, and carefully leans on the wall to stand. As he stands, he realises something is wrong; his arms and legs feel so heavy they don't seem his own — Kunlun-jun's ability to move freely between the heavens and the earth and to crush the three realms beneath his feet has simply disappeared.

Not only that, but his Bright-Mirror wristwatch has stopped, the half dozen charm papers left in his wallet have turned into regular newsprint that doesn't react at all, he can't summon his bullwhip — and even the Zhenhun Ling bound to his blood is lying in his palm without a hint of life, turned into a perfectly normal plaque of wood.

Zhao Yunlan raises She Sishu's life lamp and takes a look around him — it's desolate to the extreme. With a glance he can see that none of the street lamps are lit, and the street is lined on both sides by uneven, half broken-down houses, and the air is thick with dust.

It's like an old ruin.

He takes a couple of unsteady steps before he has to stop, shaking out the sand in his shoes. Each breath feels like acupuncture, needles pricking at his lungs, and an ache in his heart comes and goes, making it hard to breathe. When he was a mortal, Zhao Yunlan couldn't say he was perfectly healthy, but he wasn't plagued with illness either ... maybe he's become unused to mortality?

Zhao Yunlan, dragging his somewhat heavy body, walks around the street once. His cell phone has no signal as he checks the time.

20:45.

The little plate of ham he pinched from the cutting board before dinner had been barely enough to fill the gaps between his teeth, and after the sprained ankle and the aching chest, this mortal body is making him remember what it feels like to have stomach problems.

He hears something go “meow” and sees a black cat jumping from the branch of a dead tree near him onto a roof, padding delicately over the broken-up stones on the top of a wall, tail raised high and in no hurry at all. From every angle it looks like little Daqing — with a neck and a waist and all, a picture of the youthful days before he got fat!

Zhao Yunlan has a habit of calling cats and dogs whenever he sees them, so he whistles at the cat. The moment the cat’s green eyes turn his way, Zhao Yunlan notices it holding a paper charm in its mouth. Before he’s able to have a good look, the sky and the earth suddenly spin — the cat disappears, the street twists and warps, and Zhao Yunlan loses his footing as though stepping on air, falling heavily towards the ground. His right foot, pain finally fading from the last fall, twists again.

Zhao Yunlan hisses in pain, then he’s stunned to find out he’s right back where he woke the last time.

He helps himself up against the same wall, and barely walks a step before he feels that something doesn’t feel right with his feet — the sand he’s spilled out of his shoes is back.

Zhao Yunlan’s pupils shrink a bit as he realises something, and taking out his phone, he checks the time.

20:35.

This is ... ten minutes ago?

Zhao Yunlan takes quick steps along the street, holding onto his phone to keep track of the time. Ten minutes later, sure enough, that black cat appears again in the same pose, jumping out from the same place. This time, Zhao Yunlan doesn't try to catch the attention of the magical cat, but stays in the corner to observe for a bit instead.

The cat holding a charm in its mouth raises a paw and takes five steps ... and the sky-spinning-street-warping feeling is back!

Again, Zhao Yunlan returns to ten minutes ago.

This goes on for two, three times, and Zhao Yunlan doesn't even bother standing up again — it's not easy taking off these shoes.

This world is like a repeating song; the song is about 10 minutes, the space within isn't overly large, either. He's been trapped within these 10 minutes, time cycling over and over again.

Zhao Yunlan runs his hand along the wall, and he thinks about the strange 'bubbles' he saw when he was separated from Shen Wei.

'Bubbles' ... time that goes in a cycle ...

Suddenly, Zhao Yunlan stands, and again he pours the sand out of his shoes, and this time, he runs through the desolately empty streets. In the very moment that cat appears, he clamps onto the life lamp with his mouth and takes a running start, grabbing the edge of the roof so he can run up the short wall onto the roof. With one arm he sweeps up the spitting, angry cat, and digs the paper charm out of its mouth, flipping over for a landing. Before his feet hit the ground the time for space and time to orient back to its starting point has nearly come. Zhao Yunlan quickly moves the paper charm onto the flame of the life lamp. It catches fire. At the same time, Zhao Yunlan



hears a bang next to his ear as if something has shattered, and the cat in his hand turns into a spiral of pale smoke.

Zhao Yunlan stumbles for a few steps, and when he looks up again he discovers that he hasn't been sent to the starting point — the street in front of him has undergone some subtle changes. A single street lamp has been lit, the air is far less dusty, the tree is no longer bare. Though it only gained a few leaves, it is at least alive.

Zhao Yunlan brushes off the dust on his clothes. "Is that so." He sucks his teeth, says, "I thought there was some treasure here in the South China Sea, but no, I find only problems."

Everyone knows that you can't actually turn back time, and a person can't run wild over their own timeline. By the same token, cause and effect is unbreakable.

Before Kunlun-jun returned to his altar, Zhao Yunlan once travelled back eleven years to 2002<sup>279</sup>, but in reality that wasn't true time travel. It was the agricultural god Shennong taking an eleven year reincarnation wheel and storing it in a scale of Nüwa, the half snake mother goddess. The "little wheel" was a world like a mustard seed moulded by Shennong: a world much like our own but only an illusion. He's taken a turn in a mustard seed<sup>280</sup>.

Back then, when She Sishu passed the Nüwa scale to him, Zhao Yunlan walked into this mustard seed on his own without suspicion. The time in the seed cycles and so Zhao Yunlan flowed along with the wheel, arriving at eleven years ago ... until Shen Wei used the Zhanhun blade to cut the seed open from the outside, dragging him back to reality.

The 'bubble' that separated him and Shen Wei must be just like the little wheel that was eleven years long — every 'bubble' is a world undergoing a repeating segment of time.

There exist simple worlds that cycle every ten minutes, and there also could be worlds that cycle only once a million years, infinitely realistic, vast and infinitely complex.

So this isn't any sort of 'holy artefact' at all. When the ancient gods were trying to create the true reincarnation wheel they'd gone down the wrong road, and this is the left over garbage from their experiments, sealed away in the South China Sea — unexpectedly disturbed by the Ghost King's life force via this copy incident, and then crashed into by a great yao, causing it to resurface in the human world.

Zhao Yunlan raises his head to look at the street lamp, and thinks, "I knew it — none of you would leave me any actual inheritance. You all only ever leave me messes that need cleaning up."

Now, he has no idea which year and month Shen Wei's been stolen off to; it would be impractical to expect his blade as reinforcement. Each of these endlessly repeating worlds can only be broken through from the inside.

This isn't difficult — each mustard seed has a connection with reality, and it is from this connection that Zhao Yunlan can enter from the outside. Find it, break it, and the seed will have nothing to cling to, and disappear like a flame after it dies.

For example, the 'connecting point' of the eleven-year wheel from back then was the mysterious book, 'Unusual Ancient Legends'.

At the time, the Zhao Yunlan from the real world had one, and there was another one in the little wheel. When he brought the book into the little wheel, the two identical 'Unusual Ancient Legends' became one, the seed world and the real world 'sticking' together; illusion and reality overlapping.

That Zhao Yunlan urgently wanted to find out what Shen Wei was hiding from him, and followed the book desperately without any

thought of destroying it. But if, when he'd acquired the 'Unusual Ancient Legends' in the little wheel, he'd burned it, the cause and effect of the little wheel would have seriously departed from the cause and effect of reality, and the world within the wheel would have disappeared like smoke, not needing Shen Wei to cut through it with his blade.

If he'd burned the copy of 'Unusual Ancient Legends' from inside the wheel and returned to reality, the real book should still be in his hands, and wouldn't forever stay in the little wheel to cycle forever.

As for the real 'Unusual Ancient Legends,' it was in all likelihood sneaked into the S.I.D. by Shennong-bo.

Now, these overlapping mustard seed worlds look like 'bubbles', with Zhao Yunlan's shadows projected into them, and each one would duplicate something he carries, becoming the 'connecting point' between each seed world and reality: his stopped Bright-Mirror wristwatch, the paper charm that's now wastepaper, the Zhenhun Ling becoming normal wood, the bullwhip he cannot summon ... even the immortality of Kunlun-jun.

Zhao Yunlan doesn't know which object each world corresponds to, he can only search them one by one. He has to destroy something in each world and destroy the seed before that object will follow him back into reality.

"This is so much trouble," Zhao Yunlan sighs. "If I knew this would happen I would have just gone back and organised an exam."

This is all because of the imprudence of the South China Sea water tribes; when he gets back, he's going to have a feast of sea food at a street food stall.

(5)

Zhao Yunlan has already forgotten how long he has lingered in countless seeds.

In the beginning, all the seeds were only simple scenes: a single broken down street, a dark and sunless city, the suburbs, underwater ... and there were no other people at all. The cycle of time was as short as ten minutes and as long as three days, and what they duplicated were just small, inconsequential things.

But soon afterwards the seeds became more and more complicated, more and more immense, and other people began to appear, even the people he knows — for example, the seed that was about his Bright-Mirror wristwatch cycled for a full three years, the setting being Zhao Yunlan's previous incarnation, living in the early years of the Republic.

The Bright-Mirror was passed down by the last Lord Zhenhun, or his last incarnation. He was chasing a kidnapper then, a mountain ghost or demon, and in the process shattered the face of his watch. The hostage was a child from an orphanage, and a man who proclaimed himself the Dean of the orphanage rushed to him and took away the child, and, on seeing that his watch was broken, told him he knew a good craftsman and he could have it fixed. When it was returned, the watch was already able to see between yin and yang, had become the magical treasure 'Bright Mirror.'

Zhao Yunlan, observing coldly from the outside, watches the incarnation who shares his face slowly realise what's happened to his watch, thus running off to the orphanage to find the dean only to find out that the dean is a short and stout nun and not at all the same person who took his watch away.

"Shen Wei ah," Zhao Yunlan follows his past life, thinking of the origin of his watch, shaking his head and can't help laughing, "you sneaky son of a gun."

The repeating time loops become longer and longer, and when they exceed fifty years, Zhao Yunlan finds himself no longer an observer of a seed world, but rather a part of it with his own identity, following the movie script of the world.

What happens in each seed world isn't necessary from his memory; there are some that are very much like the memory of an incarnation with some subtle changes, and some are utterly strange and wonderfully new with flashes of familiarity in between. Zhao Yunlan prefers the latter, because in the five thousand years of memories of the time he spent in the wheel of reincarnation, Shen Wei made few appearances. On the rare occasion that they run into each other, he only catches a glimpse before Shen Wei is gone. But in the fabricated worlds, Shen Wei wears different identities and spends lifetimes by his side until they each find the object that breaks open the world ... the real Shen Wei — as expected, Shen Wei's Zhanhun blade has already been trapped inside. But even if he has the blade, he doesn't dare use it, because if the world breaks from the outside, the duplicated item will become just like the book 'Unusual Ancient Legend,' forever left behind in this particular wheel.

Zhao Yunlan breaks through eighty mustard seeds. Each time he leaves one behind, the time reverts back to 20:35.

It feels like he has already lived through every life possible in the blink of an eye.

Fortunately, Kunlun-jun's immortal soul was forged through a million years of reincarnation, and his mind remains as clear as when he took his first step. Finally, he arrives at the eighty-first seed.

Eighty-one, or nine by nine.

Zhao Yunlan has a premonition that this should be the very last world. Shen Wei is here too, but they couldn't have imagined that the cycle of time here runs as long as ten thousand years. The long stretch of time makes this feel real, and its binding force boundlessly

strong. As he approaches the end of time, Zhao Yunlan still hasn't found this world's connecting point.

Everything he's brought into these worlds, large and small — including the blood he carries in his heart and the bones of his spine — has already been shattered in the various wheels. What could it be?

What is left?

(6)

Oh, right. His very self is what's left.

The ego is enslaved by the physical body.

The heart is but a slave to material ambitions.

(7)

Zhao Yunlan emerges from the very last seed, and the world shakes as if a hundred thousand mountains are jumping like birds. A giant wave descends as though coming from the nine heavens, and the water parts before him like it wishes to make for him a road, to let the chaos-era mountain god rise between them.

At the same time, a sound like a shrill wind whistles by his ear and the Zhanhun blade appears out of nowhere to land on the ocean's surface, the entire South China Sea looks about to be sliced in two. Zhao Yunlan suddenly opens his eyes, reaching into the rolling waves for the hand holding the blade. "Shen Wei!"

The giant wave recedes, revealing Shen Wei's silhouette, looking even more distressed than him. At first glance Shen Wei seems like he hasn't woken from the endless reincarnations, and for a while he doesn't say anything.

“It’s alright,” Zhao Yunlan says quietly. “We’re back.”

Shen Wei falters, stumbling into him, strength leaving his body. His Zhanhun blade flutters downwards — onto the back of a giant snake, surfacing from the deep.

Oh good, Zhao Yunlan lets out a breath. She Sishu’s life lamp is still lit and the old wyrm is alive and well. Zhu Hong can keep sticking around at the S.I.B. to muddle up a salary and not have to be dragged back for a succession.

(8)

“Oh? Oh ... oh! Then okay, that’s great.”

Early morning in the offices of 9 University Road, one can hear Guo Changcheng’s tone change many, many times. From shock, to helplessness ... to embarrassment — Guo Changcheng says into the phone, embarrassed, “There isn’t anything I want, thank you leader. Really, I really don’t need ... anything from the duty-free shop, you don’t need to worry about it, what’s important is that you have fun ... ai, have fun, have a good vacation ...”

Before he’s even finished passing on the last blessing, Chu Shuzhi and Lin Jing have already slapped their desks and are standing in anger, and Daqing has turned into an angry ball of fur.

Chu Shuzhi says, “Is that Lao Zhao — what did he mean? What do you mean good vacation? Is he serious?”

Lin Jing says, “He ran away? He just dropped everything and left? Where be the laws of the heavens?”

Daqing up jumps from the couch. “Why that shameless son of a — give me the phone.”

Guo Changcheng puts down the receiver apologetically. “He, he already hung up.”

Daqing roars, “Call him back! If he doesn’t pick up then call Teacher Shen!”

Predictably, Zhao Yunlan habitually turns off his phone after he hangs up.

But none of them can predict that —

Shen Wei stands barefoot on the beach, one hand clutching his collar, the other wrapped around his belt. His cheeks are already red from struggling, but he’d rather die than follow the local custom and change into a pair of swim trunks.

What is this? Such impropriety! Such indecency!

Zhao Yunlan runs after him. “Just try it, if you don’t try it how can you say it’s not a good thing? I promise you’ll like it. Shen Wei, Xiao Wei, my darling treasure ... Doesn’t it bore you wearing black from head to toe all the time? This could be a gateway into a new world ... Ai! Fine, you don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to, no need to throw yourself into the ocean!”

Shen Wei, having been forced to the edge of the water, steps into the sea, his cell phone falling out of his pocket right on time for an incoming call. It rings once before the cell phone heroically sacrifices itself, the screen going black.

At 9 University Road, Guo Changcheng announces with an innocent expression, “Teacher Shen has hung up.”

“Meow —” Daqing collapses and yells, “How can Teacher Shen with his big eyes in such an honest face be capable of betraying us?!”<sup>281</sup>



# Notes

[←1]

This is the date of the Ghost Festival

[←2]

Idiom: 七大姑八大姨 = a general term for various relatives, literally "his seventh aunt on his father's side and eighth aunt on his mother's side"

[←3]

lit. "can't even release a fart"

[←4]

Idiom: 硬着头皮 = to brace oneself, to summon up courage, literally "to harden the skin on one's head"

[←5]

“Xiao”, literally meaning “Little”, “is a casual form of address, to be used with the last name (“Guo”), that implies lower standing or younger age. The opposite is “Lao” (lit. “Old”).

[←6]

lit. "his footsteps causing a breeze"

[←7]

Idiom: 说曹操曹操就到 = "Speak of Cao Cao, and Cao Cao arrives," Cao Cao being one of the kings in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, known for his cruelty.

[←8]

“Lao” (lit. “Old”) implies higher standing and/or older age, making it a respectful address for elders. Lao Wu isn’t of higher rank than Zhao Yunlan, but earns the respectful address through his age.



[←9]

The Chinese word 私塾 specifically refers to an ancient schooling style which no longer exists, and that is why Guo Changcheng is confused.

[←10]

Idiom: 血盆大口 = the ferocious mouth of a beast of prey, literally "bloody mouth wide open like a sacrificial bowl"

[←11]

Idiom: 四面八方 = all around, in all directions, literally "four sides and eight directions"

[←12]

cinnabar is mercuric sulphide ( $\text{HgS}$ ), used as a remedy in Chinese herbal medicine, as a pigment for paint (vermillion), and an important raw material for alchemy in ancient China. (source: baike.baidu)

[←13]

lit. 'dried-persimmon' face, a persimmon fruit looks flat and round when dried

[←14]

lit. "can kill within ten steps"

[←15]

Zhao Yunlan is obviously younger than Officer Yang, which is why he offers to be called Xiao Zhao here.

[←16]

以迅雷不及掩耳 = as swift as a sudden thunderclap which leaves one no time to cover one's ears



[←17]

lit. "his five sensory organs curling up into a ball"

[←18]

idiom: 逼良为娼 (bīliángwéichāng) lit. “as mournful as an honest girl forced into prostitution”

[←19]

lit. "turns into a coffin plank" - coffins are traditionally red in China

[←20]

This might refer to the fact that there are eighteen levels of Hell in Chinese Buddhist mythology, making it an unlucky number.

[←21]

lit. 菜色泛滥成海 "a green colour flowing all the way out to sea" - something like "his face turns so green it's visible from space" - Chinese humour often works through exaggeration

[←22]

the Guardian is sometimes called 镇魂令主, lit. "Lord of the Guardian Token"

[←23]

印堂发黑 = “the point between the eyebrows shows black” - this refers to a symptom considered dangerous in Chinese medicine: if the point between the eyebrows looks dark, it means something is seriously wrong with a person. (source: [baike baidu](#))

[←24]

知己 (zhījǐ) - lit. "someone who knows you as well as you know yourself" - classical Chinese concept of a confidant or bosom friend, sometimes translated as soulmate



[←25]

This refers to *Naihe Qiao* (奈何桥), the "Bridge of Forgetfulness", a bridge every soul has to cross before being reincarnated. They have to drink Mengpo's "Five-Flavoured Tea of Forgetfulness" (孟婆汤) at Naihe Qiao so they will forget everything in their current lives and prepare for reincarnation.

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meng\\_Po](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meng_Po) - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diyu>

[←26]

A legendary stone located next to the River of Forgetfulness -  
<https://chineseaesop.blogspot.com/2009/06/legend-of-three-life-stone.html>

[←27]

三尺三寸 (sānchǐ sāncùn) - keeping the traditional measurements here, because the important part is that 3 is a lucky number

[←28]

子时 (zǐ shí) - it's worth mentioning that he's using an old-fashioned way of telling time - this denotes the two-hour interval between 11pm and 1am - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional\\_Chinese\\_timekeeping#Dual\\_hour:\\_Sh%C3%AD](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_Chinese_timekeeping#Dual_hour:_Sh%C3%AD)

[←29]

yang energy is plentiful in humans, yin energy in ghosts

[←30]

封神演义 'The Investiture of the Gods' in particular, a Chinese novel from the 16th century - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Investiture\\_of\\_the\\_Gods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Investiture_of_the_Gods)

[←31]

saying: 苍蝇不叮无缝蛋 (cāngyíng bù dīng wú fèng dàn) - lit. "flies don't bite seamless eggs" - where there's smoke there's a fire, things happen for a reason

[←32]

we translated with a similar English quote the classical quote alluded to here, from the poem "Touring Shanxi Village" (游山西村) by 12th century Chinese poet Lu You:

山重水复疑无路，柳暗花明又一村 - lit. "Over numerous mountains and streams, I had my doubts that I could find the road. Then out of the shade of the willows, came bright flowers and another village."

- translation by wikisource:

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Touring\\_Shanxi\\_Village](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Touring_Shanxi_Village)



[←33]

金刚手印 (Jīngāng shǒuyìn) - Diamond (or Vajra) Mudra - a taoist hand gesture - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mudra#Vajra\\_Mudr%C4%81](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mudra#Vajra_Mudr%C4%81)

[←34]

西游记 (Xīyóu Jì) - "Journey to the West" - is a Chinese novel published in the 16th century during the Ming dynasty and attributed to Wu Cheng'en. It's one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journey\\_to\\_the\\_West](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journey_to_the_West)

[←35]

隋唐演义 (Suítáng Yǎnyì) - "Legends of the Sui and Tang Dynasties" - A historic novel written by Chu Renhuo, a writer of the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, which is notorious for being very long - it has twenty volumes and one hundred chapters.

[←36]

This is the second verse from a classical poem: 人生若只如初见，何事秋风悲画扇。等闲变却故人心，却道故人心易变。 Our attempt at a translation of the whole poem: "If life were always like Spring love, no Autumn winds or bitter woes. But you have fallen out of love, and claim that's how it always goes."

[←37]

“ge” (lit. “older brother”) - an address denoting respect or older age for people who are relatively close in age or status. It’s less formal than “Lao”. The equivalent for women is “jie” (lit. “older sister”).

[←38]

Virtue: Often known as karmic merit, a Buddhist concept where, if someone does a good thing, merit is earned, which affects their fate and the quality of their reincarnation. Merit is an important concept in this novel. Read up on merit here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merit\\_\(Buddhism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merit_(Buddhism)).

[←39]

Traditional Chinese Medicine works on the principle of energy flows. Massaging acupoints, or treating them with acupuncture, gets the energy (qi) flowing. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qi>

[←40]

The Underworld is ruled by ten kings -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yama\\_\(Buddhism\)#Yama\\_in\\_Chinese,\\_Korean,\\_Vietnamese\\_and\\_Japanese\\_mythology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yama_(Buddhism)#Yama_in_Chinese,_Korean,_Vietnamese_and_Japanese_mythology) -

[https://en.daoinfo.org/wiki/The\\_Yamas\\_of\\_the\\_Ten\\_Halls](https://en.daoinfo.org/wiki/The_Yamas_of_the_Ten_Halls)



[←41]

八字 (bāzì) , lit. “8 characters” is a Chinese form of natal chart comprising birth year, month, day, and hour, used for Taoist and Chinese astrology divination purposes - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\\_Pillars\\_of\\_Destiny](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Pillars_of_Destiny).

[←42]

The New Year Monster, 年兽 (Nian Shou), is an evil mythical beast that comes to the human world on the eve of the new year to devour humans and wreak havoc. In order to scare it off, Chinese people hang up red tapestries and set off fireworks on New Year's Eve.

[←43]

鬼见愁 lit. "ghost-annoying" - someone who's so hard to deal with, even ghosts try to avoid him

[←44]

A freely translated classical quote from 登泰山记 ("Climbing Mount Tai"), an essay from the Qing dynasty: 苍山被雪，明烛天南。 ~ "Cangshan mountain in snow illuminates the southern skies."

[←45]

五體投地 (wǔtǐ tóu dì) lit. "casting the five limbs to the earth" —referring to the two arms, two legs and forehead; the kowtow is a Buddhist religious ritual - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kowtow>

[←46]

The Jokhang Temple in Lhasa is the most important Buddhist temple in Tibet  
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jokhang>

[←47]

Kham is a region in Tibet - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kham>

[←48]

Idiomatic phrase, literally “having hunted geese for years, his eye has been pecked by a small bird he has raised himself”



[←49]

Samadhi = 三昧 (sān mèi) = Buddhist term for purity and calm attained by meditative trance; it's also the eighth and last element of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samadhi>

[←50]

Bifang = 毕方 (bì fāng) = Fire-omen bird of Chinese mythology, a one-legged red-crowned crane with a red-spotted blue body and a white beak -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bi\\_Fang\\_bird](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bi_Fang_bird)

[←51]

Idiom: 一条路走到黑 lit. "to follow one single road until dark"

[←52]

千刀万剐 (qiāndāo wànguǎ) - literally “a thousand knives, ten thousand cuts”  
- being cut by thousands of knives is a punishment notoriously used in Hell

[←53]

The Monkey King is one of the main characters from *Journey To The West*, he's very strong and powerful - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monkey\\_King](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monkey_King)

[←54]

Indigowoad Root is used as a cold remedy in traditional Chinese medicine -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isatis\\_tinctoria#Use\\_as\\_Chinese\\_medicine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isatis_tinctoria#Use_as_Chinese_medicine)

[←55]

A clear high-alcohol-content spirit, a standard choice for drinking occasions like this - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baijiu>

[←56]

往事不堪回首月明中, a modern romance web novel



[←57]

碰瓷 literally “bump the porcelain” - colloquial name for faking traffic accidents in order to fraudulently collect compensation - derived from another type of scam where “expensive” porcelain is put in a place where it’s likely to be knocked over by passers-by

[←58]

黑白无常 (Hēibái wúcháng) - two Deities in charge of escorting the spirits of the dead to the Underworld - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heibai\\_Wuchang](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heibai_Wuchang)

[←59]

牛头马面 (Niútóu + Mǎmiàn) - the two main Underworld guards, serving the Ten Kings of the Underworld - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ox-Head\\_and\\_Horse-Face](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ox-Head_and_Horse-Face)

[←60]

HP - health points

[←61]

Maneki-neko - a Japanese “beckoning cat” lucky charm

[←62]

内人 = nèi rén = “wife”, but this is a pun, because 内 also means “inside”, so he’s the opposite of an outsider.

[←63]

The colour green stands for jealousy, here Zhu Hong's jealousy of Shen Wei. The type of vinegar she mentions, 腊八醋 (làbā cù), is used to marinate cloves of garlic until they turn green. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laba\\_garlic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laba_garlic)

[←64]

金刚佛印 (jīngāng fú yìn) - a symbolic object used in Tantric Buddhism while reciting prayers - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana#The\\_Vajra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vajrayana#The_Vajra)



[←65]

He means the River of Forgetfulness; every soul has to cross it, forgetting everything in their current life in preparation for reincarnation -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meng\\_Po](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meng_Po)

[←66]

more closely translated: "I was tossed into the frying pan, and now they shall fry, too. I was rolled around on a bed of nails, and now I want to see them get pricked, too."

[←67]

伤敌一万，自损八千 - idiom: "sacrifice 8,000 of your own troops to kill 10,000 enemies"

[←68]

生辰八字 - the "eight characters" (八字) representing the year, month, day, and hour of a person's date of birth in the traditional lunar calendar, used for horoscopes / fortune telling

[←69]

This is a poem, and - like rainbowse7en - we tried to make it sound as poetic as possible. Here is a more literal translation for comparison: Waning moon, Wild burial mounds, Ghost fire lights the path of resentful souls, Wind flowing through woods, Blowing a flute of bone, Demons and monsters watch the play of foxes skinning men. This old man will calculate for you, Please, good sir, listen closely to me, Fine silver in exchange for a live man's head, Gold in exchange for a beauty's complete skin, Half a lifetime of luxury and riches in exchange for fifty ounces of oil from the corpse of a hundred day child, If the three souls and seven spirits can be offered up, You shall be promised dust returning to dust, dirt returning to dirt, Merit earned from a murderer's lifetime shall only be temporary.

[←70]

author's note (Priest) : this is a quote from the historical novel 《海内十洲记》 "Journey of Ten Continents within the Sea"

[←71]

author's note (Priest) : this is a quote from the ancient philosophical essay collection 《淮南子》 "Writings of the Huainan Masters" -

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huainanzi>

[←72]

洞房花烛 = lit. "wedding chamber with painted red candles"



[←73]

梆子 (bāngzi) = an instrument consisting of two wooden rods or planks, which are knocked together to produce a sound

[←74]

灵芝 (língzhī) = ganoderma lucidum, a mushroom used in traditional medicine

玉露 (yùlù) = lit. "jade dew", the best quality green tea, better known as gyokuro (the Japanese equivalent)

[←75]

Guzhen - a traditional stringed instrument - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guzhen>

Xiao - a traditional end-blown bamboo flute -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiao\\_\(flute\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiao_(flute))

[←76]

斂衽 = to curtsy (for women), to arrange one's clothes or sleeves in a respectful way to show obedience - often done by joining one's hands and hiding them inside one's sleeves

[←77]

In mahjong, a “pong” is a set of three identical tiles

[←78]

嵬 wéi - lofty, towering, rocky

[←79]

巍 wēi - towering, standing tall - both characters have a mountain on top and a ghost on the bottom

[←80]

和 (he) means “and”, so the combination of ‘shan’ and ‘he’ doesn’t mean anything special.



[←81]

六合 (liùhé) = north, south, east, west, up, down = figuratively "the universe, everything"

[←82]

六十四卦 (liùshísì guà) = 64 hexagrams, an ancient Chinese divination method, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I\\_Ching](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Ching) (although what it has to do with this, I'm not sure)

[←83]

天马行空 (tiānmǎxíngkōng) = lit. “like a heavenly steed soaring across the sky”, bold and imaginative

[←84]

Translation of the poem by dtriad, with permission

[←85]

Copenhagen was the site of several climate summits, so this probably refers to a high standard of eco-friendliness - but we're just guessing.

[←86]

应酬 (yìngchóu) - dinner party, entertainment, social niceties - i.e. his dad has to go to a dinner party as part of his job

[←87]

Idiom: 柴米油盐 (cháimǐyóuyuán) = firewood, rice, oil, salt = “the basic necessities of life”

[←88]

《窦娥冤》 "The Injustice to Dou E" or "Snow in Midsummer" is a Chinese play from the 13th century -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Injustice\\_to\\_Dou\\_E](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Injustice_to_Dou_E)



[←89]

Idiom: 风声鹤唳 (fēngshēnghèlì) 'the wind sighing and the crane calling' = to panic at every little thing

[←90]

Idiom: 三皇五帝 (sānhuángwǔdì) = three sovereigns and five emperors, times of myth and legend, the earliest recorded history. The names attributed to the three sovereigns are Suiren, Fuxi, and Shennong.

[←91]

穿开裆裤 (chuān kāidāngkù) = lit. “wearing pants with an open crotch” - not yet toilet-trained babies and toddlers in China wear pants like this instead of diapers

[←92]

The water god Gonggong crashed into the sky pillar Buzhou with his dragon -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Buzhou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Buzhou)

[←93]

夸父 (*Kuāfù*) is a fabled giant who tried to catch the sun -  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuafu>

[←94]

后土 (Hòutǔ) Earth Goddess, another name for Nüwa -  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Houtu>

[←95]

Idiom: 轻描淡写 (qīngmiáodànxiě) = to sketch in light strokes, understating

[←96]

lit. 'You've eaten a ferocious panther's gallbladder!'



[←97]

山海经 - a classical text describing Chinese mythological history and geography - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic\\_of\\_Mountains\\_and\\_Seas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic_of_Mountains_and_Seas)

[←98]

Sora Aoi is a Japanese actress in adult films, she's known in China as  
"Teacher Cang" (苍老师) - <https://baike.baidu.com/item/苍井空/9776304> -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sola\\_Aoi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sola_Aoi)

[←99]

风 (Feng) is said to be the oldest surname in China, it was the surname of Nüwa and Fuxi, the two ancient deity siblings from Chinese creation myth.

[←100]

太平御覽 (Tàipíng Yù Lǎn) = the 'Imperial Reader' or 'Readings of the Taiping Era', is a Chinese encyclopedia compiled between 977 and 983 A.D.

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiping\\_Yulan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiping_Yulan)

[←101]

Nüwa patches the ruptured sky with five colored stones that she melted together -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%BCwa#N%C3%BCwa\\_Mends\\_the\\_Heavens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%BCwa#N%C3%BCwa_Mends_the_Heavens)

[←102]

鰲 (Ao) - a giant mythical sea turtle (or sometimes it's a tortoise) -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ao\\_\(turtle\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ao_(turtle))

[←103]

Idiom: 有钱能使鬼推磨 Yǒu qián néng shǐ guǐ tuī mó = 'money will even make the devil turn a millstone'

[←104]

您快甬给我戴高帽 lit. “no need to wear a high hat for me”



[←105]

东南西北 (dōngnán xīběi) = east, south, west, north = all directions

[←106]

玄武 (Xuánwǔ) = the Black Tortoise of the Northern Sky

[←107]

idiom: 手无缚鸡之力 (shǒu wú fù jī zhī lì) = too weak to even truss a chicken,  
unaccustomed to physical work

[←108]

idiom: 天上掉馅饼 (tiān shàng diào xiàn bǐng) “pie falling from the sky” =  
"enjoy a free meal without having to do anything" or "getting fortune delivered  
straight into your hands", a similar image in Christian culture would be  
“manna from Heaven”

[←109]

母猪都能上树 literally "sows can climb trees"

[←110]

Quote from the classical poem “River Snow” by Liu Zongyuan -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liu\\_Zongyuan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liu_Zongyuan)

[←111]

This is a quote from 山海经 (Shānhǎi Jīng) “The Classic of Mountains and Seas”, a classic text and compilation of mythic geography. An English translation exists. -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic\\_of\\_Mountains\\_and\\_Seas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic_of_Mountains_and_Seas)

[←112]

鼎 (dǐng), here the 炼魂鼎 (liàn hún dǐng) Soul(-Refining) Cauldron -  
cauldrons are symbols of power - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ding\\_\(vessel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ding_(vessel))



[←113]

罗汉 (luóhàn), the Chinese word for "arhat", a buddhist scholar who has reached the last step of enlightenment before reaching Nirvana - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arhat> - Buddhas original followers were called the Eighteen Arhats - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eighteen\\_Arhats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eighteen_Arhats)

[←114]

三尸 (Sān Shī) “Three Corpses” = a daoist belief that humans carry three demons inside them that cause sickness and hasten death -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Corpses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Corpses)

[←115]

lit. “like Calabash Diamond Brother”, a powerful character from an animated tv series - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calabash\\_Brothers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calabash_Brothers)

[←116]

志玲 Zhiling: a Chinese pop star

[←117]

idiom: 闭月羞花 (bì yuè xiū huā) “to blot out the moon and make the flowers ashamed” = beauty that puts nature to shame

[←118]

idiom: 钻牛角尖 (Zuān niújiǎojiān) “to drill into a bull’s horn” = “to waste time on insignificant or insoluble problems”

[←119]

idiom: 眼里容不得沙子 (Yǎnlǐ róng bùdé shāzi) “unable to tolerate a grain of sand in your eye” = unable to turn a blind eye, unable to let things slide, petty, narrow-minded

[←120]

idiom: 雪上加霜 (xuěshàng jiāshuāng) “to add hail to snow” = to make things worse in an already bad situation



[←121]

This section is a quote from the classical book 《三五历纪》 (“Sānwǔ Lìjì”) “The Historical Annals of the Three and Five” where “Three and Five” stand for the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Sovereigns\\_and\\_Five\\_Emperors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Sovereigns_and_Five_Emperors)

[←122]

三山五岳 (sānshān wǔyuè) = “Three Famous Mountains and Five Sacred Mountains” - According to Chinese mythology, the *Five Great Mountains* originated from the body of Pangu.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred\\_Mountains\\_of\\_China#The\\_Five\\_Great\\_Mountains](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_Mountains_of_China#The_Five_Great_Mountains)

[←123]

The Three Sovereigns are three gods: Nüwa, her brother Fuxi, and Shennong.

[←124]

idiom 木已成舟 (mù yǐ chéng zhōu) “The timber has already been turned into a boat” = what’s done is done

[←125]

八卦 (bāguà) The Eight Trigrams are eight symbols used in daoist cosmology to represent the fundamental principles of reality. Fuxi is said to have made them in order to gain mastery over the world -

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bagua> - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuxi>

[←126]

Kun is a fish that turned into a bird named Peng, and then flew away. It's a character in a fable about flying very far -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peng\\_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peng_(mythology))

[←127]

idiom 三头六臂 (sāntóu liùbì) “Three-headed and six-armed” = formidable, possessing remarkable abilities or powers

[←128]

to kowtow = to prostrate touching one's head to the ground



[←129]

共工 (Gònggōng) = the God of Water -  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gonggong>

[←130]

颛顼 (Zhuānxū) - one of the Five Emperors

[←131]

The world was conceived as being divided into eight directional divisions, at each of which a mountain pillar supported the sky. Buzhou was the northwest one. When Gonggong crashed into the pillar, it broke and the whole world tilted towards the southeast - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Buzhou](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Buzhou)

[←132]

This is a quote from the classical poem 天问 (Tiān Wèn) “Questions to Heaven” by 屈原 (Qū Yuán) - T/N: the excerpt probably illustrates again the tilting of the world. Here's an attempt at a translation:

<http://bs.dayabook.com/poetry/chu-ci-songs-of-the-south/heavenly-questions>

[←133]

idiom: 餐风露宿 (cān fēng lù sù) “to brave the wind and dew, sleeping in the dew and dining on the wind” = to bear a hostile environment

[←134]

The pillar breaking has torn a hole into the sky, which spews torrential rain; to save humankind, Nüwa patches it with five colored stones that she melted together -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%BCwa#N%C3%BCwa\\_Mends\\_the\\_Heavens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C3%BCwa#N%C3%BCwa_Mends_the_Heavens)

[←135]

this is a quote from a philosophical classic 《庄子·逍遥游》 (Zhuangzi - "Getaway") - a metaphor for "life is short" -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi\\_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi_(book))

[←136]

夸父 (*Kuāfù*) is a giant who tried to catch the sun. Where he died a peach forest grew, called 邓林 (Denglin). - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuafu>



[←137]

嵬 (Wéi) - a 'mountain' above a 'ghost', it means "lofty"

[←138]

巍 (Wēi) - “towering, lofty, mighty”

[←139]

idiom 三跪九叩 (sān guì jiǔ kòu) - thrice kneeling and nine times bowing;  
prostrating oneself three times and knocking one's head on the ground thrice  
at each prostration

[←140]

后羿 (Hòu Yì) is a legendary archer about whom many stories exist -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hou\\_Yi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hou_Yi)

[←141]

鳌 (Ao) - a giant mythical sea turtle (or sometimes it's a tortoise) -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ao\\_\(turtle\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ao_(turtle))

[←142]

后土 (Hòutǔ) Earth Goddess - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Houtu>

[←143]

idiom: 沧海桑田 (cānghǎisāngtián) “Seas change into mulberry fields and mulberry fields into seas” - time brings great changes to the world, evanescence of worldly affairs, many changes in human affairs;

[←144]

idiom: 头重脚轻 (tóu zhòng jiǎo qīng) “a heavy head on light feet”, “top-heavy”



[←145]

山海经 (Shānhǎi Jīng) The *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is a Chinese classic text and a compilation of mythic geography. An English translation exists. - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic\\_of\\_Mountains\\_and\\_Seas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classic_of_Mountains_and_Seas)

[←146]

idiom 满嘴跑火车 (Mǎnzǔi pǎo huǒchē) “to run one’s full mouth like a train” -  
to talk big, have a glib tongue

[←147]

idiom: 马失前蹄 (mǎ shī qián tí) “The horse stumbles; the horse trips over its front hooves” = sudden failure through miscalculation or inattentiveness

[←148]

令尊 (lìngzūn) = he uses an honorific here that's very polite: "your esteemed father"

[←149]

idiom: 灯枯油尽 "the lamp will run out of oil" = "die from exhaustion"

[←150]

灯油 = "lamp oil" for the idiomatic lamp

[←151]

“There is a kind of love that’s like a knife to the heart” is a quote from the modern novel 《生死疲劳》 by 莫言 (“Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out” by Mo Yan) -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life\\_and\\_Death\\_Are\\_Wearing\\_Me\\_Out](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_and_Death_Are_Wearing_Me_Out)

[←152]

idiom 日上三竿 (rì shàng sān gān) - “the sun has risen three poles high”, “late in the morning”



[←153]

idiom 鸡毛蒜皮 (jīmáo suànpí) lit. “chicken feathers and garlic skins”, i.e. kitchen slops, unimportant things

[←154]

idiom: 稳如泰山 (wěnrú Tàishān) lit. “as stable as Mt Tai” - “safe as houses”,  
“solid as a rock”

[←155]

idiom: 稳坐钓鱼台 (Wěn zuò diàoyútái) lit. "sitting calmly, fishing in a storm" -  
"keep a cool head in a crisis"

[←156]

idiom: 撕心裂肺 (sī xīn liè fèi) lit. “heart breaking and lung rending” -  
“heartbreak”

[←157]

idiom: 刀山火海 (dāoshānhuǒhǎi) lit. “mountains of daggers and seas of flames”

[←158]

idiom: 思春 (sīchūn) lit. “to think of Spring” - “to long for love (or sex)” -  
<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%80%9D%E6%98%A5>

[←159]

The parts not related to the lantern are part of Chinese folk myth: *Naihe Qiao* (奈何桥), the "Bridge of Forgetfulness", a bridge every soul has to cross before being reincarnated. They have to drink Mengpo's "Five-Flavoured Tea of Forgetfulness" (孟婆汤) at Naihe Qiao so they'll forget everything in their current lives and prepare for reincarnation. -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meng\\_Po](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meng_Po) - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diyu>

[←160]

idiom: 退避三舍 (tuìbì sānshè) - lit. "to flee for three days", "to retreat in the face of superior strength", "strategic withdrawal"



[←161]

The traditional Chinese calendrical system has a cycle of 60 years combining ten heavenly stems (of which Ren is the ninth) and twelve earthly branches (animals, of which wu, the Horse, is the seventh) -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexagenary\\_cycle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexagenary_cycle)

[←162]

天山童姥 (Tianshan Tonglao) is a character from the novel 天龙八部 ("Demi-Gods\_and\_Semi-Devils") - she's a 96-year-old grandmother who looks like a child - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Demi-Gods\\_and\\_Semi-Devils\\_characters#Lingjiu\\_Palace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Demi-Gods_and_Semi-Devils_characters#Lingjiu_Palace)

[←163]

千年王八万年龟一样 lit. "like thousand-year-old turtles and ten-thousand-year-old tortoises", exaggerating the age of the Snake Tribe elders

[←164]

郭德纲 (Guo Degang), a Chinese comedian -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guo\\_Degang](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guo_Degang)

[←165]

idiom: 魂飞魄散 "to be frightened, terror-stricken", but used in its literal sense here: "soul flying away and scattering"

[←166]

诠释了什么叫做“鬼哭狼嚎” - taking this idiom literally: “to perform what is called ‘wailing like ghosts and howling like wolves’”

[←167]

内丹 - daoist belief that a person/animal/being can condense their spiritual energy into a physical thing, usually manifesting as an orb after a lot of cultivation, i.e. the Ghost King is so powerful, just like an almighty immortal, that he doesn't even need to cultivate so he therefore doesn't have something like a golden core of energy that lesser beings have

[←168]

一个海绵宝宝一样 = lit. "like Spongebob Squarepants" - priest sure likes to drop in pop culture references at every opportunity



[←169]

lit. "like the buzzing of a mosquito"

[←170]

“老吾老、幼吾幼” based on a Mencius quote “老吾老，以及人之老；幼吾幼，以及人之幼” = “honor all old people like your own parents, care for all children like your own children” - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mencius> - [baike.baidu](http://baike.baidu.com) [老吾老以及人之老](http://baike.baidu.com)

[←171]

idiom: 普度众生 (‘pǔdù zhòngshēng’) is a Buddhist sutra: “to deliver all living creatures from suffering”

[←172]

A Chinese tradition associated with the New Year is to go to a temple to pray/bow while burning incense, asking the gods to grant your wishes and a good year ahead.

[←173]

In fact, Guanyin is supposed to be of uncertain gender, it has nothing to do with the actors

[←174]

idiom: 鬼使神差 (guǐ shǐ shén chāi) lit. “caused by the ghost god / caused by gods or ghosts” - unexpectedly, curiously, coincidentally, unexpectedly

[←175]

神农尝百草 = The myth of Shennong trying countless plants to determine their medicinal use -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shennong#Popular\\_religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shennong#Popular_religion) -

<https://baike.baidu.com/item/神农尝百草/1322232>

[←176]

天地变色 lit. "to make Heaven and Earth change colour" or "to make Heaven and Earth angry" - loosely interpreted as causing shakes and earthquakes



[←177]

idiom: 喜怒哀乐 (xǐnù āilè) lit. “happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy” - the range of human emotions

[←178]

idiom: 强扭的瓜(不甜) (qiáng niǔ de guā bù tián) “broken-off melons aren’t sweet” - “things that aren’t meant to be cannot be forced” - only the first four characters of the idiom are used here: Ghost Face is referring to Zhao Yunlan as a “thing that isn’t meant to be”.

[←179]

the painting 《父亲》 (Fuqin = Father) by Luo Zhongli can be seen here:  
<https://baike.baidu.com/item/父亲/1465141>

[←180]

idiom: 横插一杠子给搅黄 (héngchā yī gàngzi gěi jiǎohuáng) lit. “insert a bar and break it” = “to throw a wrench into the works”

[←181]

寸鬼不留 (cùn guǐ bù liú) “no ghost left standing”, modified from the idiom

寸草不留 (cùn cǎo bù liú) “no blade of grass left standing”, “complete devastation”

[←182]

Priest explains the Grandfather Paradox in an endnote after this chapter (now moved into this footnote): a person travels to the past and kills their own grandfather before the conception of their father or mother, which prevents the time traveller's existence, thus making the time travel itself impossible/non-existent. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grandfather\\_paradox](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grandfather_paradox)  
Contrary to what Zhao Yunlan states here, Einstein didn't describe the Grandfather Paradox.

[←183]

he literally says 三魂七魄 (sān hún qī pò) - “the three and seven souls” - in Daoist philosophy, every living human has three ethereal souls and seven corporeal souls - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun\\_and\\_po](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun_and_po)

[←184]

六道轮回 (liùdào lúnhuí) - lit. "the six great divisions in the wheel of karma" - Buddhist cosmology typically identifies six realms of rebirth and existence: three higher ones (good): gods, demi-gods, and humans, and three lower ones (evil): animals, hungry ghosts, and hells.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sa%E1%B9%83s%C4%81ra\\_\(Buddhism\)#Realms\\_of\\_rebirth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sa%E1%B9%83s%C4%81ra_(Buddhism)#Realms_of_rebirth)



[←185]

idiom: 七窍生烟 (qīqiàoshēngyān) - lit. "smoke pouring out of (all) seven orifices (of his head)" - fuming, seething with anger

[←186]

idiom: 苦辣酸甜 (kulasuantian) lit. "bitter, spicy, sour, sweet" - flavours of life, mixed feelings, conflicting emotions

[←187]

铁观音 (tieguanyin), lit. "Iron Goddess of Mercy" (lit. "Bodhisattva of Compassion"), a type of oolong tea - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tieguanyin>

[←188]

泥菩萨 (nipusa) lit. "Bodhisattva of Mud" - an allegorical character who, when tasked with crossing a river, cannot spare any energy for helping others, solely focused on making it across the river himself

[←189]

Xiangqi - Chinese Chess - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xiangqi>

[←190]

Idiom: 大尾巴狼 - short form of the quote: "[a toad-butt decked out with chicken feathers, pretending to be a] big bushy-tailed wolf" - show off, play the bigshot, pretend to be all cool, act high and mighty

[←191]

Idiom: 男女授受不亲 (nánǚ shòushòu bù qīn) from a Mencius quote, lit.  
“men and women should not touch hands when they pass each other things”,  
i.e. a classical way of insisting on propriety

[←192]

离开大气层飞上月球 (líkāi dàqìcéng fēi shàng yuèqiú) - lit. fast enough to  
'leave the atmosphere and fly to the moon'



[←193]

Idiom 恨铁不成钢 (hèn tiě bù chéng gāng) lit. to hate iron for not becoming steel = to be disappointed in someone

[←194]

颛顼 (Zhuānxū) - one of the Five Emperors

[←195]

后羿 (Hòuyì) - a legendary archer - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hou\\_Yi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hou_Yi)

[←196]

后土 (Hòutǔ) Earth Goddess - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Houtu>

[←197]

镇魂令 (Zhenhun Ling) is in this novel usually translated as “Guardian Order Token”, but 镇 not only means “to guard”, but also, “to calm down, to appease,” which is the literal sense here - Kunlun’s soul fire calmed the souls ( 镇魂 ). The Holy Tree represents that power, and is later used to make the tokens for the Lord Guardian, the Guardian Order Tokens.

[←198]

The third of the three godly mountains in this novel -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Penglai](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Penglai)

[←199]

Idiom: 金口玉言 (jinkouyuyan) lit. "mouth of gold, speech of jade" - Jade is the signifier of the Emperor, so it implies that the words are as law.

[←200]

In Daoist tradition, every human has both a spiritual, ethereal, yang soul (魂 *hún*) which leaves the body after death, and a corporeal, substantive, yin soul which remains with the corpse (魄 *pò*). In most traditions, there are three hun and seven po souls - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun\\_and\\_po](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun_and_po)



[←201]

A legendary stone that helps people reincarnate together, located at the River of Forgetfulness - <https://chineseaesop.blogspot.com/2009/06/legend-of-three-life-stone.html>

[←202]

The phrase 三脚踹不出一个屁 is missing the last word here - "even kicked three times, he won't release a single [fart]"

[←203]

Idiom: 找不着北 (zhǎo bùzháo běi) – lit “unable to tell where north is”,  
confused and disoriented

[←204]

Zhao Yunlan is comparing Nüwa's creation of humans to a dance routine used in the Japanese game Hatsune Miku -

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=levan+Polkka+-+Hatsune+Miku](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=levan+Polkka+-+Hatsune+Miku)

[←205]

脱了开裆裤 (tuōle kāidāngkù) = lit. “shed his open-crotch pants” - not yet toilet-trained babies and toddlers in China wear pants like this instead of diapers

[←206]

三尸 (Sān Shī) “Three Corpses” = a daoist belief that humans carry three demons inside them that cause sickness and hasten death -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Corpses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Corpses)

[←207]

Lit. “too lazy to turn around a pancake” - Translated very freely here. If you’re interested, the story referenced here is about a child who has a pancake but still starves because it’s too lazy - <http://folklore.usc.edu/the-laziest-boy-in-china/>

[←208]

A supermarket chain



[←209]

抗日战争 - The Second Sino-Japanese War, which is part of the  
Second World War

[←210]

肥猫流浪记 - a 1988 Hong Kong movie, probably chosen for the title more than its content -

<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%82%A5%E7%8C%AB%E6%B5%81%E6%B5%AA%E8%AE%B0>

[←211]

“a sore waist” is a euphemism often used in novels, it means they had sex.

[←212]

a cartoon character -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleasant\\_Goat\\_and\\_Big\\_Big\\_Wolf](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pleasant_Goat_and_Big_Big_Wolf)

[←213]

挫骨扬灰 (cuògǔ yánghuī) - lit. "grinding the bone and scattering the ashes" =  
"with extreme prejudice", "destroying completely"

[←214]

梅花阵 (méi huā zhèn) = lit. “plum blossom formation” - a) a position in Go which traps the opponent’s playing pieces, b) a circular landmine array

[←215]

idiom: 神龙见首不见尾 (shén lóng jiàn shǒu bú jiàn wěi) - lit. "you can see the heavenly dragon's head, but not its tail" - never fully visible, secretive, mysterious, elusive, appearing one moment and disappearing the next

[←216]

All manner of paper objects, called zhǐzā (纸扎) are sold in mourning shops as offerings to the dead. Most commonly known is paper money, but zhǐzā traditionally included paper men meant to work for the deceased as servants - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhizha>



[←217]

The left half has burned, turning it from 镇魂 "Guard Souls" into 真鬼 "Real Ghost"

[←218]

As in the 三魂七魄 (sān hún qī pò) - “the three and seven souls” - in Daoist philosophy, every living human has three ethereal souls and seven corporeal souls - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun\\_and\\_po](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun_and_po)

[←219]

鼎 (dǐng), here the 炼魂鼎 (liàn hún dǐng) Soul(-Refining) Cauldron -  
cauldrons are symbols of power - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ding\\_\(vessel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ding_(vessel))

[←220]

粽子 (zòngzi) - a type of rice dumpling tied in bamboo leaves -  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zongzi>

[←221]

The Prajna Paramita is a collection of Buddhist sutras -  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prajnaparamita>

[←222]

A list of all punishments in the Ten Halls:

<https://owlcation.com/humanities/The-Horrific-Chinese-Ten-Courts-of-Hell>

[←223]

二五八万 - is a mahjong reference for the 二万, 五万, and 八万 tiles needed to win, i.e. he knows he has a winning hand and is thus cocky and arrogant - <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%BA%8C%E4%BA%94%E5%85%AB%E4%B8%87/7153560>

[←224]

铜柱 (tóng zhù) - copper pillars: one form of torture is to be chained to red-hot copper pillars



[←225]

Idiom: 秋后的蚂蚱 (qiūhòu de màzhà) - lit. "locusts in late autumn" - nearing their end, being in their last stage

[←226]

瑶池 (Yáochí) - the Jade Pool is located in the Kunlun mountains, the Goddess of the West grows Peaches of Immortality there -  
<https://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends-asia/reserved-gods-only-two-humans-have-tasted-chinese-peaches-immortality-009596>

[←227]

Lei Feng was a propaganda vehicle for the Chinese communist party portrayed as a selfless, modest model citizen - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lei\\_Feng](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lei_Feng)

[←228]

糖葫芦 (Tánghúlu) - candied fruit (predominantly hawthorn) sold on a stick -  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanghulu>

[←229]

中二病 (Zhōng èr bìng) - loan word from the Japanese Chunibyō, used to mockingly describe the grand delusions of teenagers -  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ch%C5%ABniby%C5%8D>

[←230]

Idiom: 有眼不识泰山 (yǒu yǎn bùshí Tàishān) - lit. "having eyes but not seeing Mount Tai" - failing to see something important

[←231]

- 三清道宗 (Sān qīngdào zōng) - the three highest gods in the Taoist pantheon
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Pure\\_Ones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Pure_Ones)

[←232]

Buddha's original followers - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eighteen\\_Arhats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eighteen_Arhats)



[←233]

A traditional Buddhist symbol of luck and prosperity -  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swastika#Buddhism>

[←234]

idiom: 坐山观虎斗 (zuò shānguān hǔdòu) - lit. "sit on the mountain and watch the tigers fight" - "when two dogs fight over a bone, the third one runs away with it"

[←235]

龙抬头了 “the dragon is about to raise his head” - “things are about to happen”, also a symbol of the new year: “new things are coming”

[←236]

Idiom: 开天辟地 (kāitiānpìdì) lit. “split apart heaven and earth” - reference to how Pangu created the world by splitting chaos with his axe

[←237]

末法 (Mòfǎ) - Buddhist term for a time period of decline -  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_Ages\\_of\\_Buddhism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Ages_of_Buddhism)

[←238]

四象 (Sìxiàng) = "Four Beasts" standing for the four cardinal directions  
north, west, east, and south - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\\_Symbols](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Symbols)

[←239]

Idiom: 初生牛犊不怕虎 (chūshēng niúdú bùpà hǔ) - lit. "newborn calves aren't afraid of tigers" - young people are fearless

[←240]

btw, in Chinese we say 茄子 / eggplant. Which sounds like: qie zi, or nearly like cheese. Eggplant your sister.



[←241]

In all of the extras, the staff at S.I.D. refers to Shen Wei as Teacher Shen. In the novel, they stopped calling him Professor Shen after they got to know him. Think of it as familiar respect.

[←242]

三魂七魄: In Daoism, every person has three immortal souls and seven mortal forms. tbqh this translator was raised Daoist and still doesn't get it — you try explaining the holy trinity.

[←243]

大不敬 is historically a crime against the Emperor, and since he's divine, it's a crime against the heavens. It literally reads "Great Disrespect." The land beneath the 黃泉 or Yellow Spring is called 大不敬之地, literally The Land of Great Disrespect. While we're at it, 黃泉 / Yellow Spring is the Chinese equivalent of Hades. It's not hell. There's another word for that.

[←244]

Chinese government documents have red headers. Also, The yao tribes pray to Kunlun, and Zhu Hong is a yao, so he just called her an idiot.

[←245]

That's as close as I can get to 我擦, 老娘怎麼那麼牛掰呢. Slang is hard. Old broad is referring to herself.

[←246]

Yunlan here says “I never loved you” and it is a meme that came from a short film about a couple breaking up. One of them asks via text “Before I go, I want to ask you one last question” and before they can text again to ask, the answer’s already come through, “I loved you.” Then it got memed and though the question’s always the same variation of “one last thing before I go,” the answers can be anything. You can say, “42,” for example. Or, “I’ll save my mom.”

[←247]

虐戀情深 literally reads 'SM Deep Love', and it's a tag used for light novels with angst.

[←248]

Yunlan is referencing a nursery rhyme for rock paper and scissors.



[←249]

he literally says, “You can have/make me do whatever” (or make whatever happen to me) but above is the implication.

[←250]

“Java Island” is a way to say “not even on the map anymore” or “gone”

[←251]

There's a saying that people with the same last names are “五百年前是一家”  
/ belonged to the same family 500 years ago. The number varies.

[←252]

a reminder: Chu Shuzhi is a Chinese zombie, which I suppose is like both a zombie and a vampire, by western standards.

[←253]

蛋疼 / dan teng, literally 'egg pain' is something like a headache, but it's closer to the saying, 'that makes my testicles hurt.' You can use it in place of the word headache about things/people/situations that gives you a headache, BUT the word differs from a headache in that it is also used for boredom. So bored your testicles hurt. I have no idea where this came from but you don't need to have testicles to say it. It's also used in sentences like "that has dan teng to do with me" in which case it's just a mildly crass way of saying 'nothing.'

[←254]

Merit = positive karma. Good, virtuous actions; every time you choose not to do harm, you gain merit.

[←255]

度 / du literally means “to cross (a river)” and in Buddhism it means to “cross the river to the shores of enlightenment.” It carries the meaning of ‘saving’ or ‘salvation,’ and leads to an ‘escape’ from the Wheel of Reincarnation. What Lin Jing paraphrased is from the Lotus Sutra. 佛自住大乘，如其所得法，定慧力莊嚴，以此度眾生。

[←256]

priest made this part up, it's not in any sutras, The word here for 濟 / benefit also means "ferry," which ties into the sutra Lin Jing quoted above.



[←257]

Shennong-bo always uses the more polite form of 'you' when addressing Kunlun. 您/nin instead of 你/ni. He also refers to Kunlun as 山聖/Shansheng, which in this configuration means 'sacred mountain,' btw, this is not a real world title, no god is referred to by it, priest made it up afaik. From Shennong-bo's mouth, it's just another way to say 'you.' I'll use the pinyin when it's a name/title, and a translation when it's a common noun.

[←258]

趙先生 could be translated to Mr. Zhao, but Shennong-bo is old and formal, so I went with what 先生 would have been translated to according to Mencius. 先生, 父兄也。And older man in a family, a father or an older brother.

[←259]

春意 means both 'the start of spring' and 'thoughts of love.'

[←260]

風騷茄子 / Coquettish Eggplant is a dish...this ia a pun.

[←261]

he's quoting fundamental principle of Marxism here so that's why Shen Wei makes fun of him

[←262]

犯克 roughly means "it disagrees with my birth hour." So it does mean jinxed, but with him ONLY

[←263]

Zhao Yunlan says Shen Wei has a “nature as ever changing as running water and alights on all like flower petals,” and it’s usually a phrase meaning ‘fickle woman.’

[←264]

茶水 / cha shui / lit. tea water / cheap tea is the kind of tea you get in diners, usually ceylon, comes in a plastic cup, made with cheaper leaves and brewed bulk in a metal dispenser



[←265]

相親 / Xiangqin. A marriage interview arranged by a matchmaker. A direct equivalent is the Japanese o-miai. The characters mean mutual-intimacy.

[←266]

屍王 / lit. corpse king. I suppose it could also read "necromancer" but he's a corpse himself, so closer to a lich.

[←267]

人棍 / human stick is actually a brutal ancient torture that's best not described here. Chu Shuzhi uses some harsh language in his head...

[←268]

殭屍 / Jiangshi / what Chu Shuzhi is, is a culturally unique mythological creature that originated from the way undertakers were said to have ordered corpses to jump as they led the dead back to their hometowns for burial. Depending on the telling, they eat flesh, drink blood, sleep in coffins, fear the sun, and only in some stories do they have minds of their own.

[←269]

to get around the couple of derogatory terms the author used, I did change them: Raj from BBT was referred to as “The little Indian from BBT”

[←270]

Renminbi, lit. The People's money, the cash of the PRC

[←271]

挖牆腳 - lit. dig at the foot of a wall. Applicable both in the case of someone seducing your husband or a competitor trying to lure away an employee.

[←272]

搞大象 lit. setup-big-elephant. It came from 搞對象 lit. setup a partner. It's just slang to replace the middle character with 大 / big, or 小 / small to indicate whether the partner is serious or casual.



[←273]

The last line used 印度阿三 and here's the [Baidu entry](#). I ended up using “turban” instead because it's what she really meant as a description, and it's a word used in Chinese history — think “Yellow Turban Rebellion” before the Three Kingdoms period.

[←274]

Three realms: desires, form, and formlessness

[←275]

A 裡 / li is a Chinese mile, in modern times, it is half of a km.

[←276]

Sangzan is using unnecessary 4-character idioms. When he does, I capitalise the words.

[←277]

海膽 / Sea urchin is written literally "sea gallbladder." In English, you say someone with courage as having "guts," in Chinese, you say they have "gallbladder."

[←278]

Dianxia is an honorific for kings/queens

[←279]

壬午年 is utterly untranslatable but it's 2002, okay? See: sexagenary cycle.

[←280]

'Mustard seed world' is likely named for the parable of the Sumeru mountain contained in a mustard seed, or 'The Sumeru Mountain contains a mustard seed, and a mustard seed contains the Sumeru Mountain' and the ending of THAT story states that the worlds are ever-changing and therefore unreal.



[←281]

“沒想到你個濃眉大眼的都叛變革命了” / “I did not imagine a person like you with such thick eyebrows and big eyes would end up becoming a rebel” is a quote... from a 90's movie.